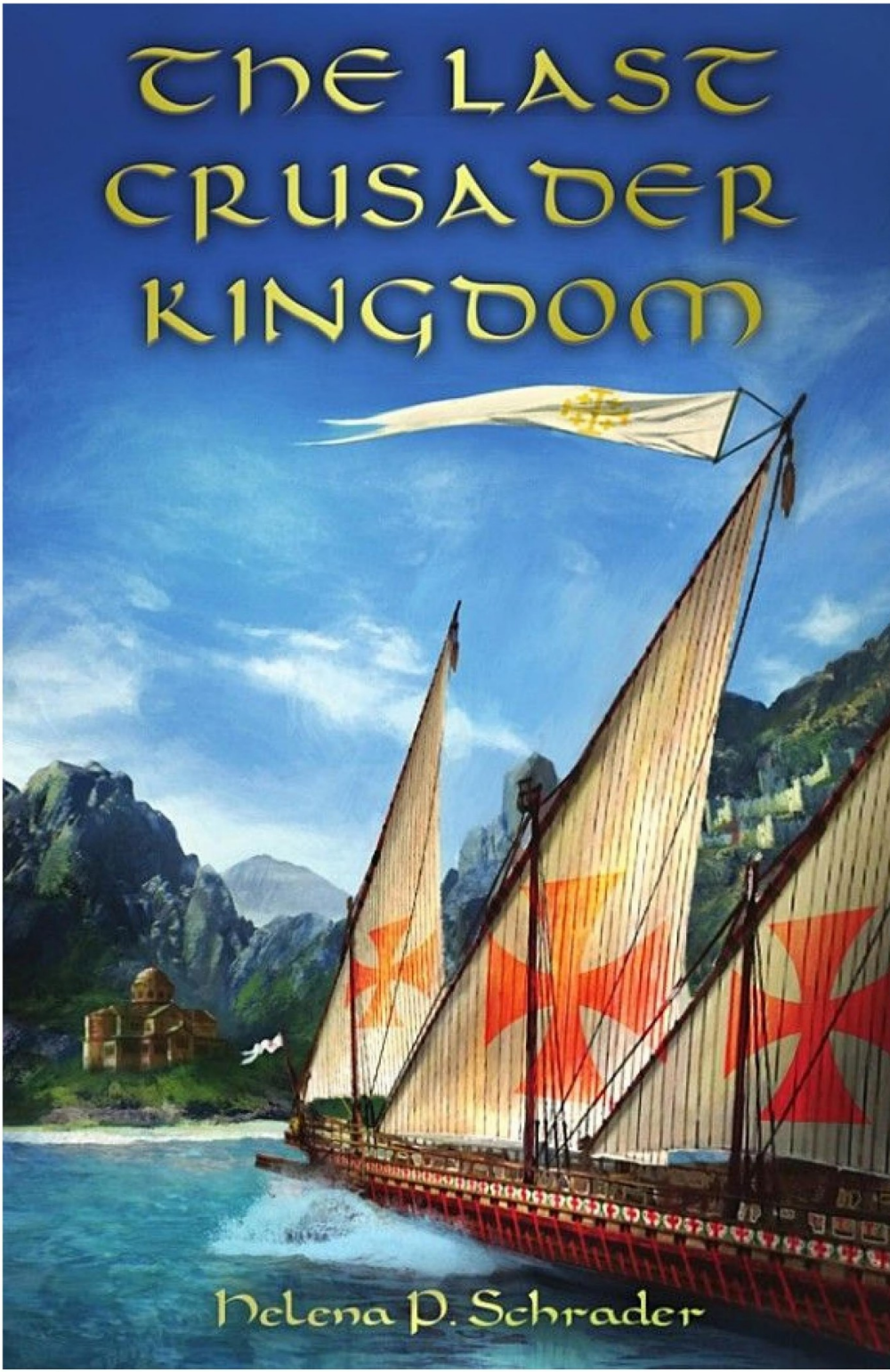
The Last Crusader Kingdom



Helena P. Schrader

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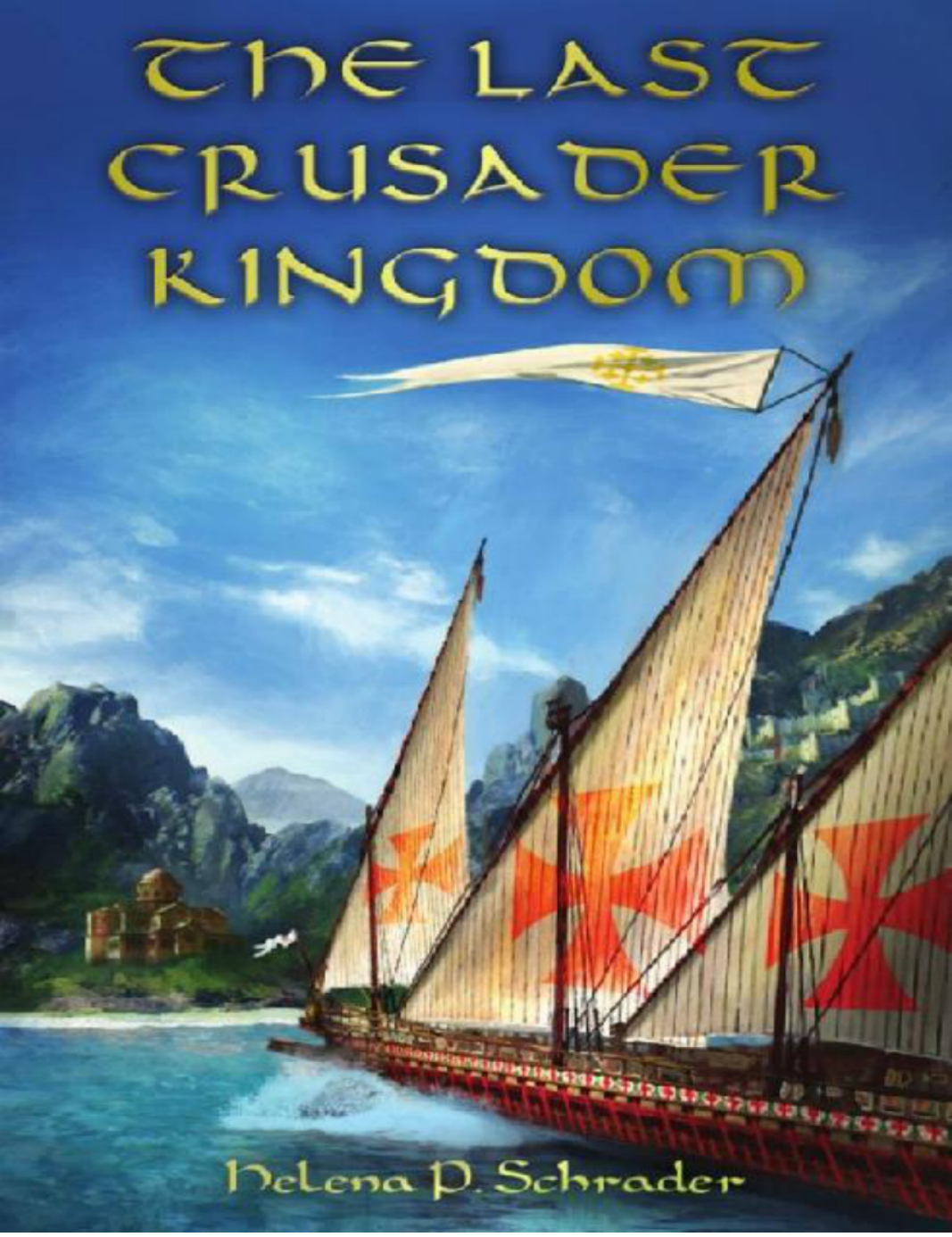

Helena P. Schrader

The Last Crusader Kingdom

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Dawn of a Dynasty in Twelfth-Century Cyprus

Helena P. Schrader

The Last Crusader Kingdom: Dawn of a Dynasty in Twelfth-Century Cyprus

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Published by Wheatmark®
2030 East Speedway Boulevard, Suite 106
Tucson, Arizona 85719 USA
www.wheatmark.com

ISBN: 978-1-62787-517-2 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-62787-518-9 (ebook)
LCCN: 2017946595

Contents

Cast of Characters
Genealogical Charts
House of Jerusalem
House of Lusignan
House of Ibelin
Maps
Map of Cyprus
Map of Outremer at the Start of the 13th Century
Introduction and Acknowledgments
The Last Crusader Kingdom
Prologue: Lusignan's Wolves
1 Arrest of a Constable
2 The Great Negotiator
3 Encounters in Seaside Taverns
4 The Ineffective Despot
5 Of Beggars and Kings
6 Interlude in a Precarious Peace
7 Rebels Against the Hospital
8 Disinherited
9 Staking a Claim
10 Call of Kin
11 Faltering Dynasty
12 Unhealed Wounds
13 An Eye for an Eye . . .
14 A Lawless Land
15 The Saint in the Cave
16 The Light at Dawn
17 The Old Kingdom
18 Pirates of the Mediterranean
19 Leo of Armenia
20 A Crown for Cyprus

21 One Wrong Step
22 The Last Kingdom
Dear Reader
Historical Notes
Glossary
Also by Helena P. Schrader

Cast of Characters

Historical figures are in **bold**; characters who appear twice are marked by an *; dates in italics are estimates.

House of Jerusalem

Isabella, Queen of Jerusalem, b. 1172, reigned 1190-1205

Henri de Champagne, consort of Isabella 1192-1197

Marie de Montferrat, daughter of Isabella by her second husband, Conrad de Montferrat, b. 1192, reigned 1205–1211

Marguerite, daughter of Isabella and Champagne, *b. 1194*, died before 1205

Alice, daughter of Isabella and Champagne, *b. 1195*, m. King Hugh I of Cyprus 1210, died 1246

Philippa, daughter of Isabella and Champagne, *b. 1196*

House of Lusignan

Guy de Lusignan, King of Jerusalem 1186–1190, widower of Queen Sibylla

Aimery de Lusignan, his elder brother, King of Cyprus, 1196–1205, King of Jerusalem 1197–1205

Eschiva d'Ibelin, *b. 1165*, Aimery's first wife from ca. 1173

Guy, their eldest son, *b. 1182,* died before 1205

Burgundia, their eldest daughter, *b. 1184*

Helvis, their second daughter, *b. 1186*

John (called "Aimery" to avoid confusion with John d'Ibelin), their second son, *b. 1189,* died before 1205

Hugh, youngest son of Aimery and Eschiva, b. 1195, King of Cyprus 1205–1218

House of Ibelin

Balian d'Ibelin, *b. 1149*, Baron of Ibelin 1177–1187, Baron of Caymont 1192–*1199*

Maria Comnena, his wife, *b.1154*, Queen of Jerusalem 1167–1174,

mother of Queen Isabella,* d. 1217

Helvis, their eldest daughter, b. 1178, m. **Reginald de Sidon** ca *1192*

John, their eldest son, b. 1179, Constable of Jerusalem 1198, Lord of Beirut from *1202,* d. 1236

Margaret, Balian and Maria's second daughter, *b. 1181*

Philip, Balian and Maria's second son, *b. 1182*

Eschiva*, Balian's niece

Henri de Brie, Balian's nephew, son of his half-sister Ermengard, *b. 1166*

Heloise, his wife

Anseau, their eldest son, *b. 1184* (Note: Although we know Anseau de Brie was a grandson of Balian's half-sister—either Ermengard or Stephanie—we do not know his father's name. His grandfather was Anseau.)

Conan, their second son, b. 1185

Other Barons of Outremer

Richard of Camville, appointed baillie of Cyprus by Richard I

His son Richard, "Dick," squire to Guy de Lusignan

Robert of Thornham, appointed baillie of Cyprus by Richard I

Humphrey de Toron, formerly a baron in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, first husband of Isabella of Jerusalem (the marriage was annulled by a Church court headed by the Papal Legate in November 1190)

Galganus de Cheneché, adherent of King Guy at the latest from the siege of Acre 1189 onwards

His son, **Gauvain**

Reynald Barlais, a Poitevin supporter of the Lusignans

Aimery de Rivet, seneschal of Cyprus in 1197

Walter de Bethsan

Ibelin Household

Georgios, Balian's squire

Beatrice d'Auber, Maria's widowed waiting woman, a former Saracen captive

Bart, Amalric, and Joscelyn, her sons

Anne, Beatrice's niece, lady to Eschiva de Lusignan

Sir Galvin, a Scottish knight

Sir Sebastian, a Syrian Christian knight

Sir Constantine, an Edessan knight with Armenian blood

Father Angelus, Maria Zoë's confessor, tutor to the children

Greeks

Abbot Eustathios, Abbot of Antiphonitis
Brother Zotikos, a monk of Antiphonitis
Lakis, an orphan whose parents were murdered by the Franks
Andreas Katzouroubis, an apothecary
Father Andronikos, a priest
Captain Kanakes, a pirate

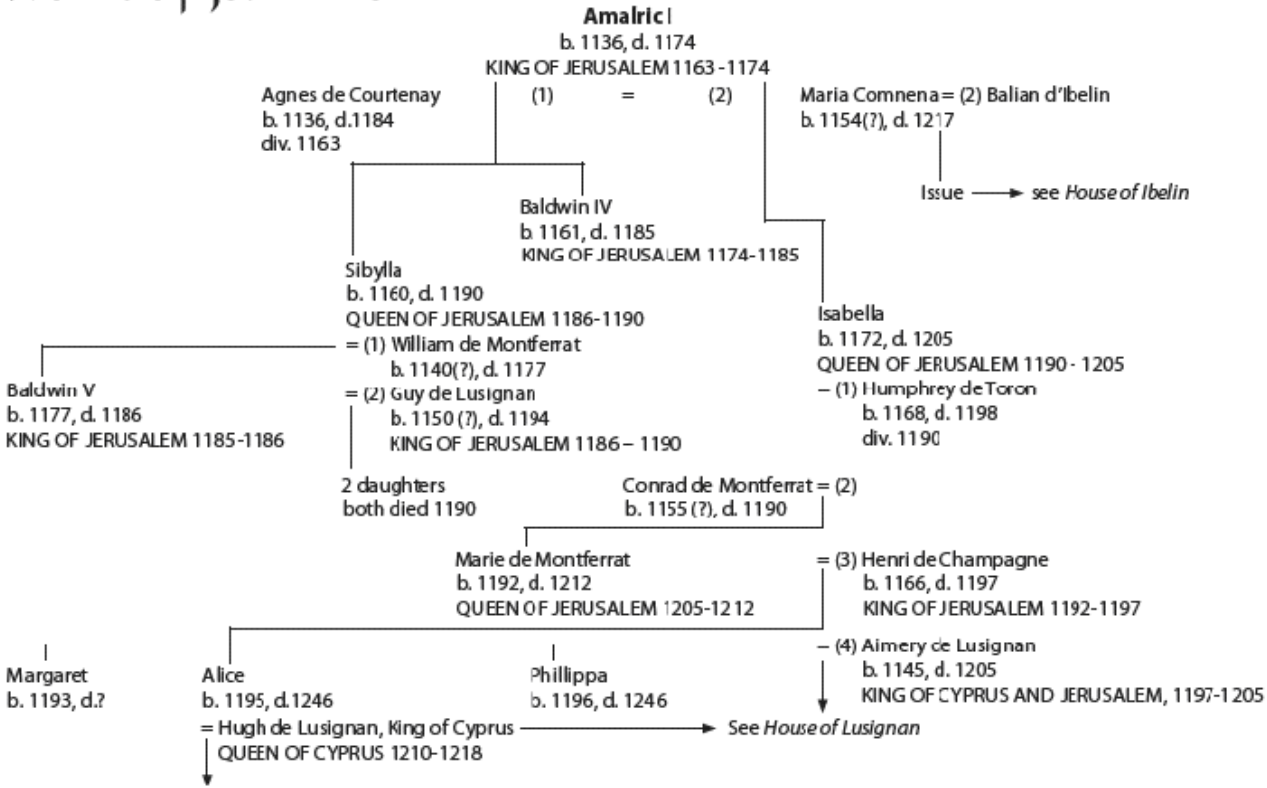
Italians

Carlo di Rossi, a caravansary/khan owner
Mario, his brother
Francesco Pasquali, bailli of the Pisan commune on Cyprus

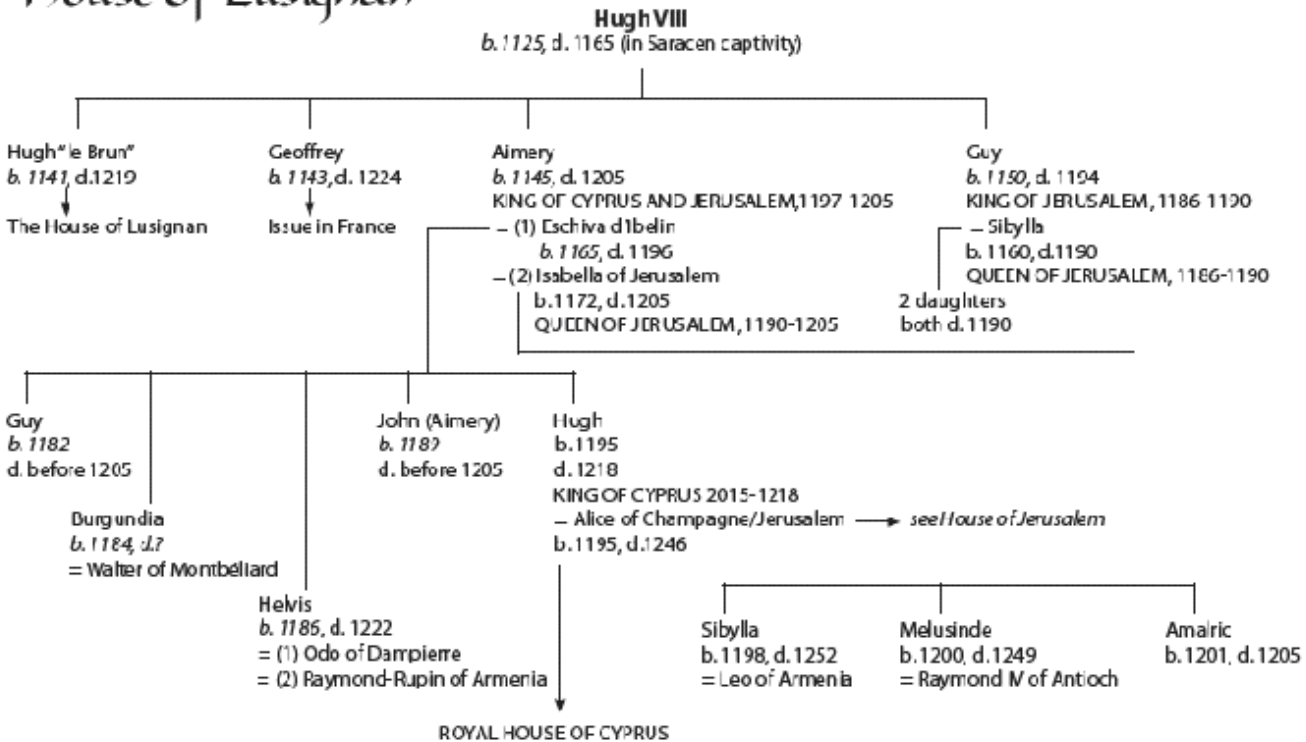
Armenians

Leo, Prince (later King) of Armenia
Simon, Lord of Corycos
Ravon, his son

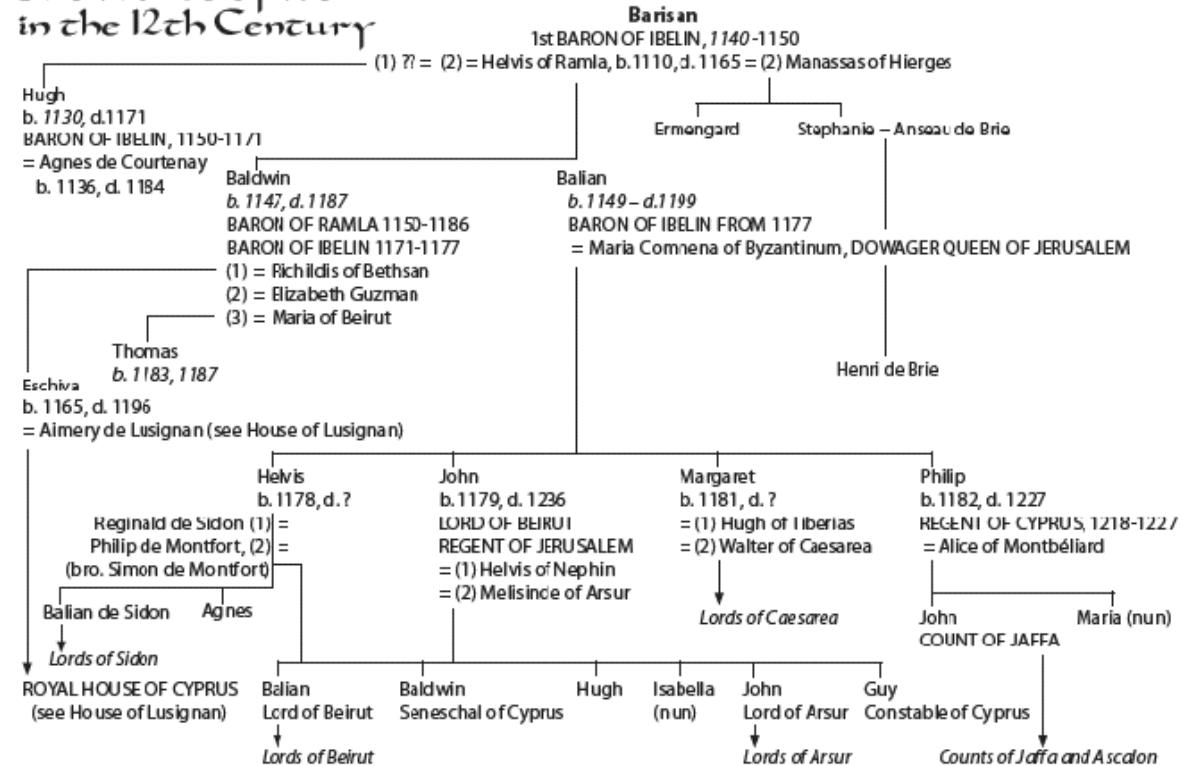
House of Jerusalem

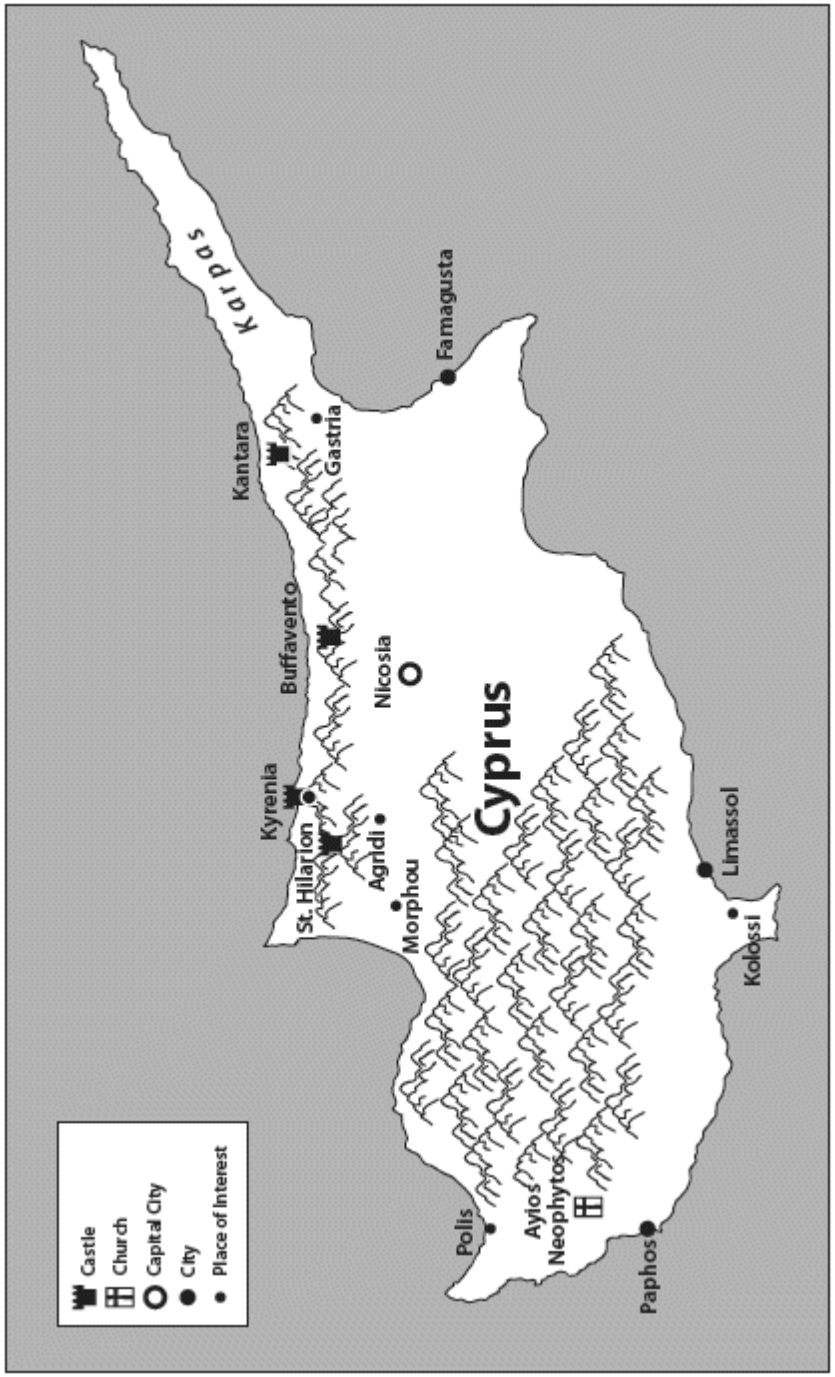


House of Lusignan

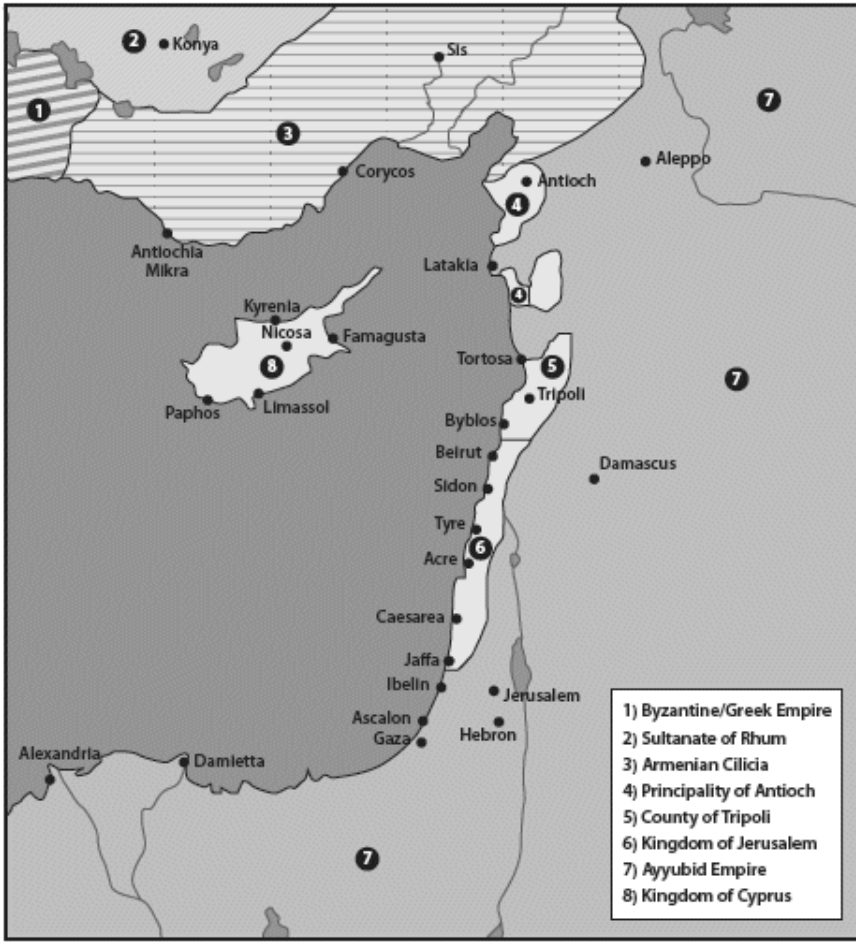


The House of Ibelin in the 12th Century





Map of Cyprus



Map of Outremer at the Start of the 13th Century

Introduction and Acknowledgments

In contrast to my Jerusalem Trilogy,** the historical basis for this novel is very thin. The early history of the Kingdom of Cyprus is largely lost in the mists of time, and much of what we think we know—or what is currently accepted in academic circles—is dubious. There are grounds for questioning some of the common assumptions—such as the year of Balian d'Ibelin's death, the uncompromising nature of Ibelin hostility to Aimery de Lusignan, the "late" arrival of the Ibelins on Cyprus, and more. I hope to publish a history of the Ibelins, in which I will raise a number of these issues in a nonfictional format in order to invite scholarly discussion.

Meanwhile, however, this novel offers a fictional depiction of events as I believe they *could* have happened, including the usual advantages historical fiction offers with respect to exploring human nature and relationships. As a novel, this book looks at the founding of the Kingdom of Cyprus in the years 1193-1198—but also at the ever-recurring need to pacify countries or regions that have been torn apart by wars, invasions, and tyrannical government. This is a novel of medieval Cyprus—and of post-conflict reconstruction around the world in any age.

But first a few words about the period and characters in this novel, and about the major revisionist thesis incorporated in the novel and why.

We know that Richard I of England, having conquered Cyprus in May 1191, sold it to the Knights Templar for one hundred thousand bezants in July of the same year. According to Peter Edbury, the leading modern historian of medieval Cyprus, Templar rule was "rapacious and unpopular," resulting in a revolt in April 1192. Although a Templar sortie temporarily scattered the rebels, the causes of the revolt were hardly addressed, and the latent threat of continued and renewed violence was clear. In the circumstances, the Grand Master of the Templars recognized that his Order would have to invest considerable manpower to regain control of the island. He also recognized that he did not have the resources to fight in *both* Cyprus and Syria. In consequence, he gave precedence (as he must) to the struggle on the mainland, the Holy Land itself, against the Saracens. The Templars duly returned the island to Richard of England.

Richard promptly sold the island a second time, this time to Guy de Lusignan. Guy de Lusignan had been crowned and anointed King of Jerusalem in 1186 in a coup d'état engineered by his wife, Sibylla. Although Guy de Lusignan was widely viewed as a usurper, the bulk of the barons submitted to his rule in order to fight united against the much superior forces of Saladin that threatened the Kingdom. Guy, however, proceeded to prove the low opinion of his barons correct by promptly leading the entire Christian army to an avoidable defeat on the Horns of Hattin on July 4, 1187. He spent roughly a year in Saracen captivity, while his Kingdom fell city by city and castle by castle to Saladin, until only the city of Tyre remained. Needless to say, this further discredited him with the surviving barons, prelates, and burghers of his kingdom. His claim to the crown of Jerusalem was undermined fatally when his wife, through whom he had gained it, died in November 1190. Although Guy continued to style himself "King of Jerusalem," a fiction at first bolstered by King Richard of England's support, by April 1192 King Richard had given up on him. Bowing to the High Court of Jerusalem, Richard abandoned Guy and acknowledged Conrad de Montferrat as King of Jerusalem. The sale of Cyprus to Guy was, therefore, a means of compensating him for the loss of his kingdom of Jerusalem.

Guy may have left for Cyprus at once, in which case he would have arrived in April 1192. However, this is far from certain. At that time the Third Crusade was ongoing, and it is unlikely that Guy would have been able to convince many knights to accompany him as long as Richard the Lionheart was fighting for Jerusalem and Jaffa. A more likely date for Guy's arrival on Cyprus is therefore October 1192, after Richard's departure for the West.

Guy was apparently accompanied by a small group of Frankish lords and knights whose lands had been lost to Saladin in 1187 and 1188 and had not been recaptured in the course of the Third Crusade. The names of only a few are known. These include Humphrey de Toron, Renier de Jubail, Reynald Barlais, Walter de Bethsan, and Galganus de Cheneché. (Guy's older brother Aimery de Lusignan was notably absent.) Guy would have arrived on an island that was either still in a state of open rebellion or completely lawless.

Admittedly, historian George Hill (who was actually an expert in ancient history, coins, and iconography rather than a medievalist), tries to explain how Guy arrived on an island eagerly awaiting him by inventing (that is the only word one can use, since he cites no source) the story that the Templars "slew the Greeks indiscriminately like sheep; a number of Greeks who sought asylum in a church were massacred; the mounted Templars rode through [Nicosia] spitting on their lances everyone they could reach; the streets ran with blood . . .

The Templars rode through the land, sacking villages and spreading desolation, for the population of both cities and villages fled to the mountains." (George Hill, *A History of Cyprus, Volume 2: The Frankish Period 1192 – 1432*," Cambridge University Press, 1948, p. 37.)

There's a serious problem with this lurid tale. As Hill himself admits, the Templars had just fourteen knights on Cyprus and twenty-nine sergeants, while Edbury calculates that the Greek population of the island was roughly one hundred thousand. Yes, in a surprise sortie to fight their way out of Nicosia and flee to Acre (as we know they did) the Templars probably killed many civilians, including innocent ones. It is unlikely that the fleeing Templars would have taken the time to stop and slaughter people collected in a church, however, because that would have given the armed insurgents (who had forced them to seek refuge in their commandery in the first place) an opportunity to rally. They certainly did not have the time and resources to massacre people in other cities scattered over nearly ten thousand square kilometers of island. In short, we can be sure the Templars killed enough people to be remembered with hatred, but not enough to break the resistance to Latin rule, much less to denude the island of its population. If nothing else, if they had broken the resistance, they would not have fled to Acre, admitted defeat, and urged the Grand Chapter to return Cyprus to Richard of England!

Despite the absurdity of the notion that Guy arrived on a peaceful island willing to receive him without resistance, most histories today repeat a charming story that as soon as Guy arrived on Cyprus, he sent to his arch-enemy Saladin for advice on how to rule it. What is more, the ever-chivalrous and wise Sultan graciously responded that "if he wants the island to be secure, he must give it all away." (See Edbury, *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades, 1191 – 1374*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 16.) Allegedly, based on this advice, Guy invited settlers from all the Christian countries of the eastern Mediterranean to settle on Cyprus, offering everyone rich rewards and making them marry the local women. According to this fairy tale, the dispossessed people of Syria, both high and low, flooded to Cyprus and were rewarded with rich fiefs, until Guy had only enough land to support just twenty household knights—but after that everyone lived happily ever after.

History isn't like that, although—often—there is a kernel of truth in such legends. I think it is fair to assume that many of the men and women who had lost their lands and livelihoods to the Saracens after Hattin did *eventually* come to settle on Cyprus, but I question that they arrived in the first two years after Guy acquired the island. The reason I doubt this is simple. The Knights Templar had just abandoned the

island because it would *be too costly, time-consuming, and difficult to pacify*. In short, whoever came to Cyprus with Guy in early or late 1192 would *not* have found an empty island—much less one full of happy natives waiting to welcome them with song and flowers. On the contrary, the natives were *already* in active rebellion against the Templars and ready to resist further attempts by the Latins to control and dominate them. Perhaps the one sentence about making the settlers marry local women is a hint to a more chilling reality: that *years* of resistance to Latin rule left the local population with few young men, but many widows, by the time the settlers finally flooded in.

Furthermore, we know that at no time in his life did Guy de Lusignan distinguish himself by wisdom or common sense. He alienated his brother-in-law King Baldwin IV and nearly the entire High Court of Jerusalem within just three years of his marriage to Sibylla. He lost his entire kingdom in a disastrous and unnecessary campaign less than a year after he was crowned king. He started a strategically nonsensical siege of Acre that consumed crusader lives and resources for three years. He did nothing of note the entire time Richard the Lionheart was in the Holy Land. Is it really credible that he then took control of a rebellious island (that the Templars thought beyond their capacity to pacify) and set everything right in less than two years?

I think not. And Guy *had* only two years, because he died in 1194, either in April/May or toward the end of the year, depending on which source one consults. That is too little time even for a more competent leader to be the architect of Cyprus' success. That honor belongs, I believe, to Guy's older brother, the ever-competent Aimery de Lusignan, who was Lord of Cyprus not two years, but eleven.

It was certainly Aimery who obtained a crown by submitting the island to the Holy Roman Emperor, and it was Aimery who established a Latin Church hierarchy on the island. Indeed, there is ample evidence of Aimery's able administration of Cyprus and, from 1197 to 1205, of the Kingdom of Jerusalem as well. It was Aimery de Lusignan who collected the oral tradition for the laws of Jerusalem (which had worked so well) and had them written down in a legal codex known as *The Book of the King*. Thus it was Aimery who not only founded the dynasty that would last three hundred years, but also laid the legal and institutional foundations that would serve Cyprus so well into the fifteenth century. It is therefore far more likely that it was Aimery, not Guy, who brought settlers in—after first pacifying the Greek population and institutionalizing tolerance for all natives irrespective of religion or language that mirrored the customs of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It is this thesis that forms the basis of

this novel.

There is, however, another "mystery" that I seek to explain in this novel—namely, the roots of Ibelin influence on Cyprus. Historians such as Edbury posit that the Ibelins were inveterate opponents of the Lusignans until the early thirteenth century. They note that there is no *record* of Ibelins setting foot on the island of Cyprus before 1210, and insist that it is "certain" they were not among the early settlers—while admitting that it is *impossible* to draw up a complete list of the early settlers. Edbury, furthermore, admits that "it is not possible to trace [the Ibelins'] rise in detail," yet argues it was based on close ties to King Hugh I. Close? Hugh was the son of a cousin, which in my opinion does not constitute terribly "close" kinship.

Even more difficult to understand in the conventional version of events is that the Ibelins became *so* powerful and entrenched within just eight years of their supposed "first appearance" on Cyprus, when an Ibelin, presumably with the consent of the Cypriot High Court (that is, the barons and bishops of the island, who had supposedly been on the island far longer), was appointed regent of Cyprus. A decade later, these alleged "latecomers" to Cyprus led a successful baronial rebellion against the most powerful monarch in Christendom—the Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich II—and all without, allegedly, holding fiefs on Cyprus. I don't think that's credible.

My thesis and the basis of this novel is this: while the Ibelin brothers Baldwin and Balian d'Ibelin were inveterate opponents of *Guy* de Lusignan, they were on friendly terms with *Aimery* de Lusignan. Aimery was, for a start, married to an Ibelin: Baldwin's daughter and Balian's niece! We have references, furthermore, to them "supporting" Aimery as late as Saladin's invasion of 1183. I think the Ibelins were very capable of distinguishing between the two Lusignan brothers, and of judging Aimery by his own strengths rather than condemning him for his brother's weaknesses.

Furthermore, the conventional argument is that Balian d'Ibelin died in late 1193 because he disappears from the charters of the Kingdom of Jerusalem at that date. While this is a reasonable argument, it is not compelling. The fact that Balian d'Ibelin disappears from the records of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1193 *may* mean that he died, but it could just as easily mean that he was occupied elsewhere. For example, he could have been busy on Cyprus.

The lack of documentary proof for his *presence* on Cyprus is not grounds for dismissing this possibility, because 1) the Kingdom of Cyprus did not yet exist, so there was no chancery and no elaborate system for keeping records, writs, charters, and so on, and 2) those who would soon make Cyprus a kingdom were probably busy fighting

a hundred thousand outraged Orthodox Greeks on the island!

But why would Balian d'Ibelin go to Cyprus at this time if it was such a wild and dangerous place?

Because his wife, Maria Comnena, was a Byzantine princess, related to the last Greek ruler of the island, Isaac Comnenus. She spoke Greek, understood the mentality of the population, and probably had good ties (or could forge them) to the Greek Orthodox elites, secular and ecclesiastical, on the island. She had the means to help Aimery pacify his unruly realm. Furthermore, Balian was a proven diplomat par excellence, who would also have been a great asset to Aimery.

If one accepts that Guy de Lusignan failed to pacify the island in his short time as lord, then what would have been more natural than for his successor Aimery to appeal to his wife's kin to help him get a grip on his unruly inheritance?

If Balian d'Ibelin and Maria Comnena played a role in helping Aimery establish his authority on Cyprus, it is nearly certain they would have been richly rewarded with lands and fiefs on the island once the situation settled down. Such feudal holdings would have given the Ibelins a seat on the High Court of Cyprus, which would explain their influence on it. Furthermore, these Cypriot estates would most likely have fallen to their younger son, Philip, because their firstborn son, John, was heir to their holdings in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. John was first Constable of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, then Lord of the hugely important barony and port of Beirut, and finally, after King Aimery's death, regent of the Kingdom of Jerusalem for his half-sister's daughter. Philip, on the other hand, was Constable of *Cyprus* and later regent of Cyprus for Henri I—despite the fact that his elder brother was still alive at the time.

Last but not least, no historian is able to explain why Aimery de Lusignan named John d'Ibelin Constable of Jerusalem in 1198, when John was just eighteen or at most nineteen years old. It has been suggested that the appointment was "just nominal" and didn't carry real authority—but there is no evidence of this. To the contrary, the position was anything but nominal throughout the preceding century. Furthermore, even if nominal, why would Aimery appoint the young Ibelin to such a prestigious and lucrative post if Ibelins and Lusignans were still, as historians insist, bitter enemies? Postulating a personal friendship between Aimery and John, on the other hand, would explain it. Given their age differences, the relationship of lord and squire is the most plausible explanation. The lord/squire relationship brought men very close and gave each great insight into the personality, strengths, and weaknesses of the other. It was also common for youths to serve a relative, and so quite logical for John to

serve his cousin's husband.

While this is all speculation, it is reasonable and does not contradict what is in the historical record. It is only in conflict with what modern historians have postulated based on a paucity of records. I hope, therefore, that readers will enjoy following me down this speculative road as I explore what *might* have happened in these critical years at the close of the twelfth century.

For readers familiar with the Jerusalem Trilogy, there is one major and one minor change. First, whereas I found it expedient to invent a younger brother for Balian in the form of "Henri d'Ibelin" for the Jerusalem Trilogy, further research has uncovered a very real nephew who would better serve the purposes of the narrative in this (and coming) books. "Henri d'Ibelin" has, therefore, been transformed into "Henri de Brie," the son of Balian's half-sister. Second, I changed the name of Balian's older brother from Baldwin to Barisan "Barry" to avoid confusion with King Baldwin, who was a major character in the first two books of the trilogy. In this and subsequent books, I will refer to Balian's older brother by his correct name, Baldwin. For other minor changes, see the historical notes.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my editor Christina Dickson for her meticulous editing and overall support and encouragement. I'd like to thank my cover designer Mikhail Greuli for a lovely cover that captures the beauty of Cyprus and the juxtaposition of Orthodox Church and invading Franks. Last but not least, I wish to thank all my test readers for their candid but constructive criticism. All of these people contributed to making this a better book, which I hope you, as readers, will enjoy. If you do, please write a review and post it on Amazon and/or Goodreads. Thank you all!

****Knight of Jerusalem, Defender of Jerusalem,** and *Envoy of Jerusalem*, published by Wheatmark in 2014, 2015, and 2016 respectively.

Prologue: Lusignan's Wolves

Antiphonitis Monastery, Cyprus
March 1193

BROTHER ZOTIKOS WAS WORRIED ABOUT THE monastery's cow. They had only one at the moment, because the older cow had died during the winter. The surviving cow was with calf, and she had been restless all afternoon. So when the other eight monks retired to the dormitory after vespers, Brother Zotikos went out to the barn. The fieldstone structure sat farther down the steep slope from the church, crouching against the eastern wall of the complex, so Zotikos took a brass oil lamp to light his way. He set the lamp carefully on the flagstone porch to the barn. (Too many fires had been caused by knocked-over lamps in barns . . .) Just as he was about to step inside, he heard a noise beyond the wall that made him freeze.

"Help!" someone called in a faint, breathless, but desperate voice. "Help!"

Brother Zotikos was in his early twenties, of burly build and robust health. He had joined the monastery two years earlier, but before that he had helped his father in their cooperage. He didn't hesitate a moment. He ran to open the gate that gave access to the rugged track leading down to the main road from Kyrenia to Karpasia.

The gate was barred by a heavy timber beam, but Brother Zotikos lifted this clear of the supports and opened the gate. The youth who had been leaning against it fell inside, collapsing to the ground at his feet. "Help!" he repeated.

Brother Zotikos bent over him. The youth looked healthy, but he was hardly able to speak for breathing so heavily. He had apparently run up the steep hill from the coastal road. "They're slaughtering us!" he gasped out, dragging himself upright by grasping Brother Zotikos' legs and black cassock. "My dad—he sent me—to fetch—help!"

"Who is slaughtering you?" Brother Zotikos asked as he helped the youth up. He recognized him as Lakis, the younger son of the miller at the foot of the gorge.

"Franks! Lusignan's wolves!"

"But why? That's—" Brother Zotikos cut himself off. What was the

point of protesting or questioning? The youth was clearly terrified, and something had to be happening to make him so. But they were just four servants, two shepherds, nine monks, and the abbot. Furthermore, except for himself and Brother Athanasios, the monks and servants were elderly, not to say feeble.

Lakis misunderstood his hesitation and gasped out: “They set fire to the oil press! If you don’t believe me, come and see!”

Yanking hard on Brother Zotikos’ hand, Lakis pulled him out of the walled compound and along the stony path that zigzagged steeply down the slope. At the first bend, a view opened up of the gorge falling sharply northeast to the fishing village that sat below the monastery on the coast. Brother Zotikos gasped. It wasn’t just one building that was on fire, but a half-dozen. The smell of smoke was in the air and his hair stood up on the back of his neck as a faint, high-pitched scream reached him on the breeze. It was a woman’s scream, and it made his blood run cold.

By morning, more than two dozen villagers had reached the refuge of the monastery. They arrived breathless, with scratched and bleeding legs from cutting through the underbrush, and many of them were still barefoot or in their nightclothes. They had not had time to grab anything but their wives and children. The dazed women sat clutching their screaming infants, who had long since soaked their diapers and wet the clothes of their mothers as well. The smaller children clustered around them, too frightened and bewildered to even cry. The men argued and ranted, outdoing one another with the tales of horror they had witnessed.

Father Eustathios listened to them patiently without comment. Then he ordered the elder monks to see that the visitors were given food, a chance to wash themselves and their clothes, and a place to sleep. Finally, he told Athanasios and Zotikos to accompany him down the hill. Father Eustathios, who was in his fifties and suffered from arthritis, rode the monastery donkey; the two young monks walked.

As they descended toward the village, they came upon small groups or lone villagers still dragging themselves up the hill to the monastery. These were men with injuries or wounds, hysterical girls carried by their brothers, mothers clutching injured children. Partway down the road, they came upon a woman and her unconscious husband. The man’s head was covered in crusted and still-shimmering blood. His wife poured out a tale of horror with a flood of tears. Her elder son and husband had tried to stop the Franks from taking her daughter from the house, but they had smashed her boy’s face with a mace, killing him with a single blow, and everyone could see the state her husband was in! As for her daughter . . .

When they approached the mill that lay a little outside of town, they first encountered a terrified mule that had evidently broken free of its stall at the price of tearing its shoulder open. A hundred yards further, they found only the charred ruins of the mill itself, including the partially incinerated corpses of Lakis' parents and siblings.

After that it just got worse.

It took them two days to bury all the victims. The survivors helped the monks, and even started to scratch together what was left of their lives. Lakis was told he could stay at the monastery, helping with the livestock, until someone could get word to his maternal uncle in Karpasia that he was orphaned.

But once the last Mass had been said and the last of their guests (save Lakis) had departed, Brother Zotikos realized that he could not just accept what had happened. Innocent people had been slaughtered while they peacefully pursued their humble lives. Pious and devout women had been defiled in a church—before being butchered. Men had been murdered for defending their homes, their livelihoods, and their daughters.

How could they just go back to praising God as if nothing had happened? Why should he *praise* God at all? For what? For letting this happen?

Brother Zotikos' blood was boiling. He could neither sleep nor pray for fury. His rage was too great, and it kept growing. Who were these men who had worked such destruction? What right did they have to destroy the lives of others? Why were they allowed to break the laws of civilization and Christianity with impunity?

When his rage had built up to the point that he could contain it no longer, Brother Zotikos burst in on his abbot and exploded. "We can't just suffer this! We can't—shouldn't—'turn the other cheek'! They are monsters! Worse than Saracens! We must fight them!"

Father Eustathios was hunched over his desk reading something, and he slowly turned to face his outraged subordinate. His eyes were piercing and they bore into Brother Zotikos, making him feel both naked and uncertain. "You want to fight the Franks?" he asked coldly.

Brother Zotikos already felt a little foolish under the abbot's gaze, but he persisted. "Yes! We can't allow them to just slaughter us as if we were less than sheep! Mere insects! They have treated us worse than infidels, worse than livestock! As if neither we nor they were Christians!"

"You are aware," Father Eustathios asked in a low but clear voice, "that these Franks have just fought Saladin to a standstill?"

“That was the English King—who promised us we would be left in peace, only to betray us by selling Cyprus first to the Templars and now to the Lusignan!” Brother Zotikos shot back furiously. “King Richard might have been invincible, but Lusignan lost his kingdom in a single day! He’s an idiot as well as a monster!”

“Maybe, but he is supported by a pack of greedy wolves who have lost their lands to the Saracens and have come here to steal ours in compensation. That makes them both greedy and desperate. Desperate, greedy men are notoriously vicious, tenacious, and very dangerous.”

“And for that reason we should just roll over and offer them our throats?” Brother Zotikos shot back indignantly. His dark eyes burned over his thick black beard.

“No,” Father Eustathios answered, adding in a voice that was so low it was hardly more than a hiss, “for that reason we must not bellow like a wounded bear but remain silent as a cobra—until we strike.”

Brother Zotikos felt as if he himself had just been seized by the deadly fangs of a poisonous snake, and his eyes widened in sudden understanding. “You mean . . . ?”

“Do you think you are the only man on Cyprus with a sense of honor? The only Greek with spirit and courage? Don’t be so presumptuous! But silence and stealth are our best shields. We must collect our strength, and we must await the right opportunity. When it comes—whenever it comes—we must strike without noise or warning. We must survive to strike again and again and again—until one by one, handful by handful, troop by troop, they are all as dead as the nuns of Agios Kosmos.”

Chapter One
Arrest of a Constable

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem
April 1193

THE HEAVY POUNDING OF A MAILED fist on the wooden door reverberated through the narrow stone house. The cook was startled from her sleep and grabbed her groggy husband in terror. “Christ’s bones! Who can that be in the middle of the night?”

On the far side of the room by the still-smoldering fireplace, the two scullery boys sat up. “What is it? Who is it?” the boys asked one another in fright.

“Open up!” a gruff voice shouted through the door.

From the floor above came the sound of muffled voices: Lady Eschiva’s voice was alarmed and questioning, Lord Aimery answered with a calming growl. Then a child started crying. Lady Eschiva hurried to the children’s chamber, and Lord Aimery leaned over the railing to call down the stairs: “Answer the door! Find out who it is and what they want!”

The man-of-all-work in the little household rolled out of the box bed with a grumble and padded barefoot to the door. His hairy, unshapely legs protruded naked from beneath his shirt. “Coming! Coming!” he called as the knock was repeated urgently. When he reached the door, he turned the key and pulled back the bolt to crack it open and peer into the street.

The heavy door was shoved open into his face with so much force that it flung him against the wall and smashed his nose. Blood gushed down to his mouth, and his forehead would wear an ugly bruise.

The men who forced their way inside were dressed in chain mail from head to toe. They wore skullcap helmets with heavy nose guards. Most terrifying of all, they wore surcoats with the arms of Jerusalem on them: they were the King’s men.

“Where’s Lord Aimery?” one of them barked at the stunned servants.

“I’m here!” Aimery called from the floor above. Without hesitation

the four armored men pushed past the frightened servants to the stairs at the back of the vaulted room. They pounded up to the next floor, and as they emerged out of the stairway, they found the Constable of Jerusalem hastily donning his surcoat while a young squire held his sword ready for him to take.

"Hold that, boy!" one of the King's men shouted, springing to put himself between the squire and the Constable. He pushed the squire backwards, pinned him against the wall, and wrenched the sword out of his hands with little trouble.

Meanwhile, the sergeant turned his attention to the Constable himself. "My lord, you are under arrest for high treason! Either you come with us willingly, or we have orders to take you by force."

Aimery de Lusignan was a handsome man in his early fifties. His shoulder-length blond hair was somewhat disheveled and his face was sprouting the beginnings of a beard, but he had managed to pull on braies, hose, and a gambeson over his nightshirt. He stood with his shoulders squared and his head held high. "The charges are false and slanderous!" he told the sergeant firmly. "I will defend myself before the High Court."

"Maybe. For now you're coming with us!" the sergeant answered bluntly, ominously lowering his hand to his hilt.

"Where are you taking me?" the Constable asked gruffly.

"To the royal dungeon, where all traitors are held! Now, are you coming willingly, or must I use force?"

"Will you at least allow me to put on boots?" the Constable asked back in a voice edged with bitterness.

"No tricks!" the sergeant warned, drawing his sword for emphasis before nodding to Lord Aimery to get on with it.

The Constable walked across the room to where his knee-high boots were standing, the soft upper parts flopped over on their sides. He took the suede boots, sat on the nearest chest, and pulled them on one at a time. Then he stood and surveyed the room briefly; whether he was looking for a chance to escape or simply taking a last leave was unclear. The king's men blocked the door, their swords drawn. They not only ensured he was trapped, they also kept his wife out. He could hear her anxious voice in the hall demanding an explanation. His squire was still pinned against the far wall, his eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

"John, get word to your father of what has happened," the Constable ordered the youth before walking briskly toward the men sent to arrest him. He allowed them to close around him as he passed out of the door. They clattered down the stairs and out into the street,

leaving John and Lady Eschiva standing on the upstairs landing in horrified paralysis.

"Treason?" Lady Eschiva asked the squire. "Did I hear correctly? Champagne has arrested my lord husband for treason? But that's not possible!" she protested.

"I've got to get word to my father at once!" John answered, his voice breaking with tension as the situation threatened to overwhelm him: he would not turn fourteen for another month.

"Mommy! Mommy! What are they going to do with Daddy?" It was the high-pitched voice of eight-year-old Burgundia. Ten-year-old Guy pushed past her, protesting, "They can't arrest, Daddy! He's the Constable!"

Eschiva turned toward her children, but then stopped to look over her shoulder to her husband's squire. "Yes, John, go to your father at once! If Isabella let this happen, he's the only one who might be able to help us now!"

The stables behind the house were cramped and dark. The four horses stirred uneasily, and one of them nickered at the unexpected intrusion. John was in such a hurry to get the terrible news of what had happened to his father that he hadn't thought to bring a light. He fumbled around in the dark, knocking things over, and nearly took the wrong saddle pad. He didn't bother with brushing his aging gray stallion, nor even picking out his hooves. In his mind, dark images of Lord Aimery chained to a dungeon wall spurred him to greater haste.

He tacked up the big gray in his stall, and then led him out into the narrow street. It was marginally lighter here because a three-quarter moon reflected off the pale limestone of the buildings. The big horse was fussing and nervous as he started to wake up and sensed John's agitation. John made for the eastern gate of the city. The hoof-falls of the shod stallion echoed through the silent streets. Everywhere the windows were firmly shuttered against the night; there was no sign of life until John reached the city gate itself.

The watchmen in the guardhouse were startled by a demand to open the gate in the middle of the night. One of the men came out and stood silhouetted against the warm orange light of the lamps inside. "Who goes? And what do you want at this time of night?"

Gambling that news of the Constable's abrupt arrest had not yet reached the watch, John answered as firmly as his nearly-fourteen years allowed, "I'm John d'Ibelin, the Lord Constable's squire. He has

entrusted me with an urgent message for my father, the Lord of Caymont. Let me out at once!"

The sergeant stepped closer to get a better look at John, and quickly verified he was who he said he was. The Constable's squire was not a nobody. He was a baron's son, an Ibelin—and half-brother to the ruling Queen. So the sergeant called to one of his men to open the gate, and saluted John. "Give your father my blessings, young man! I wouldn't have lived to make old bones but for him."

John nodded absently. Men said things like that to him all the time. His father was Balian d'Ibelin, the man who had led a breakout at Hattin, enabling some three thousand infantry to escape the Saracen encirclement. They were the *only* infantry to escape that day. His father had also negotiated the surrender of Jerusalem, enabling as many as sixty thousand more people to escape slaughter or slavery. Last but not least, he'd negotiated the Treaty of Ramla, which enabled tens of thousands of Christians who had been enslaved after Hattin to return to what was left of the Kingdom. In short, there were *a lot* of people who owed his father their freedom, if not their life.

As John emerged on the far side of the heavy barbican, he gently nudged the big horse with his un-spurred heels, and the stallion willingly took up a canter. He was on the main road south, and it was paved from Acre all the way to Haifa. Centurion, as the horse was called, was not particularly swift, but he was tough and trustworthy. He had served John's father as his warhorse for nearly fifteen years. He had carried the Lord of Ibelin at the Battle on the Litani, at Le Forbelet, to the relief of Kerak twice, and as recently as the Battle of Arsuf—but most important, he had carried the elder Ibelin off the murderous field of Hattin.

John was immensely proud that his father had given him Centurion along with a new hauberk, his first helmet, and a proper sword three months ago. The gifts marked his elevation in status from child to youth as he assumed the duties of squire to Lord Aimery. Lord Aimery was his cousin Eschiva's husband, the man she had married at the age of eight, when he was already nearing thirty. As a result, John had known him all his life, but John still respected Lord Aimery as a squire should. In his eyes, Lord Aimery was a paragon of chivalry: valorous on the battlefield, courteous to ladies, generous to the poor, pious and sober in word and deed. It was unthinkable that he had committed high treason. John was sure he was innocent, and the need to rescue him from injustice drove him to keep up the fastest pace possible in the dark.

After almost two hours, John reached a fork in the road. Here the right fork bent west to skirt Mount Carmel on the shore, leading to

Haifa, while the left fork bent less sharply southeast to follow the valley on the backside of Mount Carmel. John was very fortunate to still have the light of the moon, because he had to take the left fork.

This road had once been the high road to Jerusalem, one of the most heavily traveled routes in the Kingdom. But when the armies of Saladin overran the Kingdom after Hattin, all peaceful travel had come to an abrupt halt. For the following five years, the only people to use the road had been the Saracens, and they had done nothing to maintain it. The Truce of Ramla signed this past August left both the Holy City and Nablus in Saracen hands, so the former highway ended abruptly at the new frontier just beyond Caymont.

The remnants of this once important highway were now nothing but a sad reminder of what had once been. The road was in poor repair, uneven and pocked with potholes. The farther John rode, the worse the surface became. The winter rains washing off the steep slopes of Mount Carmel to his right had deposited stones, rubble, and mud in some places and had broken down the road itself in others. There were whole stretches where the road had sunk and stood awash in muddy water. Centurion had to test his way forward cautiously. John gave him a long rein, trusting the old warhorse to find the best possible footing, but it was impossible to go faster than a slow walk.

While letting the horse find their way forward, John had more time to reflect on what had happened and what an absurd situation he was in. While Lord Aimery was John's cousin by marriage, the man who had ordered his arrest, the King of Jerusalem, was his brother-in-law, the husband of his half-sister Isabella, his mother's daughter by her first husband King Amalric of Jerusalem. Although Isabella was seven years older than John and an early marriage had taken her out of her mother's household, she had always been part of the family circle. John was close to her—at least he'd thought he'd been until now!

The problem, John suspected, was that Lord Aimery was the younger brother of the *former* King of Jerusalem, Guy de Lusignan. Guy had been married to Isabella's older half-sister Sibylla. Guy continued to claim the crown for himself, even though he'd usurped the crown in the first place and his royal wife was dead. Things had seemed settled when the English King conquered the island of Cyprus and then sold it to Guy de Lusignan. Guy had sailed away to claim his new possession last fall, but John was sure Lord Aimery's arrest had something to do with him nevertheless.

Dawn was coming. It turned the sky a murky gray, and the contours of the landscape began to emerge more distinctly. The valley had widened substantially, and along the banks of the river there were plowed fields marking where settlers had returned after the truce was

concluded. On the far side of the river the hills rose up again, dark against the lightening sky, and there somewhere in the distance lay Nazareth. John could remember the town and the impressive Church of the Annunciation, but it remained in Saracen hands.

The sleepless night was catching up with him. John stopped beside a roadside well that had once belonged to a caravansary. The caravansary itself was abandoned and collecting old leaves and cobwebs, but the well was still functional. John dismounted, and threw a bucket down to draw water. The drum squeaked as it unwound, irritating Centurion, but the bucket splashed into water before it had gone too far. The rains had been good this winter.

John hauled the bucket up, removed it from the hook, and set it down for Centurion to drink. Since he was a small boy, John's father had taught him the importance of watering the horses first, but the lesson had become anchored in his brain by the knowledge that Hattin had been lost in part because many of the horses had been too dehydrated to withstand the rigors of battle. His father's younger stallion had refused to drink the night before the battle, and had collapsed under him; his father would have died if Centurion hadn't been in reserve. The older warhorse had drunk his fill the night before . . .

Now, too, Centurion sucked up the water greedily, so John hauled up a second bucket of water, but this time Centurion sniffed at it, drank a little, and then wandered off, more interested in grass. At last John dunked his tin cup into the water and drank himself.

His thirst quenched, John found he could hardly keep his eyes open. He convinced himself that there was no point arriving too early and waking everyone up. He was, he calculated, only five or six miles from Caymont. He could be there in less than an hour once Centurion was rested. So he unsaddled the big horse, lay down on the saddle blanket, and fell almost instantly into a deep sleep.

A bee woke him, and with a rush of guilt John jumped to his feet. The sun was halfway up the sky. He must have slept for three hours or more, he guessed. Meanwhile, Centurion had wandered a long way off. He grabbed the saddle and blanket and went after him, calling his name. When he was remounted, he set off at a fast pace to make up for his nap.

He had not ridden very far when, coming around a curve in the road, he abruptly came upon a large party of men and an oxcart that

completely blocked the road. John drew up, annoyed, as he tried to figure out who they were and what they were doing. They were a mixture of Franks and Syrians, judging from their different head coverings: Syrians in turbans and Franks in fitted linen caps or bareheaded. The Syrians had hitched their kaftans up, while the Franks were wearing nothing but shirts and braies, with the sleeves rolled up over their elbows. They were all barefoot with their feet covered in mud, and they were armed with picks and shovels.

As John took in the little scene, he realized they were trying to clear the debris of a small landslide out of a relatively wide stone-lined irrigation ditch that ran beside the road. The ditch led from a spring farther up the hill to the fields on the upper slope to the right of the road. As they cleared the stones out of the ditch, they lugged them over to the ox-cart to dump them in the back, apparently for use in building or repairing walls elsewhere.

John was about to ride around the party when one of the men who had been wielding a pick to loosen a stone stood to wipe the sweat from his brow, and John recognized his father. “Papa!” John called out in shock and astonishment, before correcting himself to say, “My lord!” It was not at all right for a Baron of Jerusalem to be working with a pick in the mud, John thought.

Just last fall John had personally seen his father treated almost like an equal by King Richard of England. Only a month later al-Adil, the brother of Saladin, had visited the Ibelin stud at Tyre, and again John had seen the elaborate courtesies the Sultan’s brother had shown his father. And now his father was clearing irrigation ditches with his tenant farmers?

Ibelin handed the pick to one of his companions and stepped across the ditch to approach his son, grinning. “John! What an unexpected surprise! What are you doing here?”

“I rode all night to bring you the news! They arrested Uncle Aimery for high treason—in the middle of the night—and the last thing he said to me was to get word to you straightway. But it can’t be true. I’m sure of it. After all, I’ve been with him every minute for the last three months, and he’s done nothing but his duties! He’s completely innocent! You’ve got to do something! You’ve got to—”

“Calm down,” Ibelin interrupted his excited son. “Give me a lift back to the manor, and we’ll talk to your mother.” As he spoke, he went around to Centurion’s left side, put his foot on John’s, and swung himself up into the saddle behind his son. Then he clicked to the faithful warhorse.

John didn’t mind his father riding pillion with him; his best memories of early childhood were riding like this at the front of his

father's saddle. He was distressed, however, by his father's calm. "You don't understand! They hauled Lord Aimery out of bed in the middle of the night and have taken him to the royal dungeon! He's probably chained up, and—"

"John, Aimery is Constable of Jerusalem, and he can only be tried for treason—or any other crime, for that matter—before the High Court of Jerusalem. I'm not the least bit worried that he will be able to defend himself there to the satisfaction of the majority. So don't worry. For the moment, you need some breakfast, and I certainly need a bath and a change of clothes."

The "manor" was the seat of his father's new barony of Caymont. The Truce of Ramla, signed the previous summer, entailed recognition of a new border between Frankish and Saracen territory based on the gains of the campaign led by King Richard of England. In the truce the Saracens recognized Frankish control of the coastal plain from Tyre to Jaffa. But the castle and town of Ibelin, the barony from which John's family drew its name, had not been included in the truce: it remained in Saracen hands. Likewise, the cities of Ramla and Mirabel, which had been held by John's uncle, and Nablus, his mother's dower lands, remained lost to the Saracens. Instead of his rich inheritance, John's father had been given the small but vacant barony of Caymont, a comparatively small wedge of fertile land southeast of Haifa and a good twelve miles from the sea. Caymont had never owed more than six knights to the feudal levee, and it had never been the seat of a castle, because it lay in a lush but indefensible valley.

Instead of a proper castle with strong exterior walls strengthened by towers, gatehouses, and barbicans like Ibelin, the manor at Caymont was a collection of farm buildings clustered around two courtyards. On one side of the road single-storied, barrel-vaulted storerooms of stone enclosed a square courtyard, with stables backed up against one long side of the square. On the other side of the road a stone arch led to a cobbled courtyard flanked by a mixture of two-storied and one-storied buildings. A second-floor chapel with a crypt under it took up one of the narrow sides of the courtyard. Opposite was the single-storied courthouse. Between these were on one side a well, cisterns, kitchen, brewery, bakery, and wine press, and on the other side a two-storied tract of accommodations. Over the arched entrances to the rooms on the ground floor stretched an open terrace reached by a flight of exterior stairs.

They turned Centurion over to a groom at the stable, crossed the road, and passed through the arch to enter the domestic courtyard. Together father and son climbed the exterior steps to the terrace, where large amphorae sprouted small palms. "Mother's already started

her garden," John remarked in surprise.

Ibelin laughed. "She's got her work cut out for her! There was once a walled garden on the back side of this building, but we've found over a dozen human skeletons there—along with the bones of pigs and dogs that the Saracens evidently slaughtered and then threw down on top of the Christian dead. We've tried to give the human remains a proper burial, but I can't spare the men to clean out the rest of the bones, repair the walls, and clean out the fountain just yet. We need to get the irrigation ditch cleared first, so we'll have a harvest next year. We also need to fix the vandalized oil presses and repair the damaged stable roof."

John nodded earnestly. He didn't like it here at Caymont. It wasn't home, and it was, he felt certain, haunted. The old Lord of Caymont and his son had both died during the Hattin campaign, and his wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law had failed to recognize the threat until it was too late. They had put up a futile defense against marauding Saracen cavalry and had been slaughtered (or had flung themselves out of the windows rather than submit to slavery) along with their household servants. Because they did not know exactly who had been at Caymont when it was overrun, they did not know if anyone had survived to be enslaved; they only knew they had found dozens of skeletons on their arrival here in early January. They thought they'd buried them all, but this latest story reminded John that there might be more in other unexpected places . . .

"We're making progress," Ibelin told his son, reading his distress from his open face, and clapping him on the shoulder.

John glanced up at his father and tried to smile, but as they passed from the bright sunshine of the terrace into the darkness of the hall, his spirits fell again. His mother, a daughter of the Greek imperial family, had been raised in the palaces of Constantinople. As a child she had never walked on floors of anything but marble or mosaic, but here there were nothing but rough flagstones and packed mud on the lower levels. It was more like a barn than a palace, John thought resentfully, glancing at the naked walls and the unglazed windows. How could his mother stand it here?

"Zoë!" Ibelin called, using his wife's middle name, which only he used with her. "John's here!"

A moment later Maria Zoë Comnena emerged in the doorway from the solar. She was dressed simply in accordance with her surroundings, in a rust-colored linen gown and a white surcoat of Gaza cotton. She had wrapped her head in saffron silk veils, however, and the dazzling smile she cast John reminded him that she had been a celebrated beauty in her youth. She advanced toward him with

outstretched hands, but—still every inch a queen—she did not rush or shriek with delight. John hastened to meet her, bowing over her hand as he had been taught to do from earliest childhood.

"What brings you here? Are you alone?" she asked, delighted, but already looking beyond John, expecting Aimery and/or Eschiva.

"He's got bad news," his father answered for him. "It seems Champagne ordered Aimery's arrest for high treason."

"Ah, the Pisans," the Dowager Queen replied, nodding knowingly, while John gaped and his father nodded agreement.

"What do you mean?" John asked, looking back and forth between his parents.

"You tell him," Ibelin suggested to his wife, "while I go clean up and change."

Maria Zoë nodded, and slipped her arm through her son's elbow to lead him back into the solar as she explained. "The Pisans have been attacking ships bound to and from Acre. Acting little better than pirates, actually. Champagne is understandably furious, but he doesn't have sufficient naval forces to engage the Pisan corsairs, so he threatened to take action against the Pisan commune in Acre. The problem with that is that there's no evidence—and indeed, no reason why—the Pisans of Acre should be allied with those preying on shipping bound for Acre. Your sister Isabella wrote me that Aimery tried to stand up for the Pisan commune, which infuriated Champagne. I'm sure that's what's behind this arrest. Your father will soon get things cleared up." She paused to look at her son, smiling unconsciously to see him looking so mature and masculine. He might be only thirteen but, like his father, he was tall, and already handsome—at least in his mother's eyes. "Did you ride all through the night to bring the news?"

"Yes, I left immediately after Lord Aimery's arrest. I didn't even think to take food or money with me!"

His mother laughed. "Am I being too maternal if I suggest you're famished and need some breakfast?"

"I *am* famished!" John agreed readily.

"Then let's not stand on ceremony, and go straight down to the kitchens," Marie Zoë suggested, reversing direction.

Hungry as John was, he didn't like the thought of his Imperial Greek mother, the Dowager Queen of Jerusalem, going to the kitchens. He shook his head and stopped her. "Stay here, Mama. I'll go down and get myself something. But do you really think Papa can clear this up?"

"I'm certain he can. We'll return with you to Acre as soon as you've

had a chance to eat something, your father has changed, and we can pack for a few days. Centurion can probably manage the distance again, or you can take one of the other horses. We want to get to Acre before nightfall so poor Eschiva doesn't have to spend another night in fear for her husband."

Chapter Two
The Great Negotiator

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem
April 1193

Queen Isabella I Of Jerusalem was twenty years old. She had been married at eleven, divorced at eighteen, widowed at nineteen, and married a third time within days of her second husband's assassination. She had withstood Saracen sieges at Kerak and Tyre. She had taken part in the crusader siege of Acre. She had endured the uncertainty of a husband in Saracen captivity for two years, and the trauma of a husband dying in her arms after assassins struck. For all that, she was still a lovely young woman, who had inherited her mother's classical features and curly auburn hair. Furthermore, she bloomed with the inner beauty that came from being in love with her husband and a proud new mother, the posthumous daughter of her second husband.

After Mass and breaking their fast together, Isabella and her husband Henri de Champagne kissed before separating. He went to meet with the chamberlain, chancellor, seneschal, and viscount of the port of Acre, while she went to the nursery to check on her daughter Marie. It wasn't that Isabella had abdicated ruling her Kingdom to her husband. On the contrary, she took a keen interest in legal disputes, inheritances, wardships, and marriages, as well as correspondence with foreign powers. She was less interested, however, in the commercial and monetary issues discussed with the chamberlain and viscount. Besides, she was a young mother and felt an acute need to spend time with her baby.

The nursery had served this purpose for generations and was located on the ground floor facing one of the interior courtyards, so that growing royal children had a place to run about and make noise without disturbing the business of government or attracting the attention of their subjects. It was austerely furnished (as this was an age that believed children could do with less) but spacious, and Isabella already had dreams of filling it with half a dozen children. For the present, however, the nursery was occupied by her precious little

Marie, the Syrian wet nurse, and Anne, the daughter of one of her ladies, who had been in Saracen slavery and had returned in a traumatized state.

As Isabella entered, Anne was beside the cradle, rocking it and singing a lullaby softly. Isabella smiled at her, pleased by the peaceful image, but Anne gasped at the arrival of the Queen and backed away as if she had been doing something wrong. “There’s nothing to fear, Anne,” Isabella tried to encourage the girl, but Anne dropped her chin to her chest and would not meet the Queen’s eyes as she fell into a deep curtsy. Time, Isabella told herself, time and kindness would surely heal Anne’s wounds. Then she bent over the cradle to look at her sleeping daughter.

Marie was perfect in Isabella’s eyes. Isabella was sure she would grow up to be a great beauty, since her father had been one of the handsomest men of his age: the charmer Conrad de Montferrat. Isabella was glad that she had this last gift from the man who had taught her the joys of the bedchamber—and also glad that his child had been a girl, so her present husband Henri could sire the son who would one day rule her kingdom after her.

She did not want to wake her daughter, who was sleeping so blissfully, but she could not resist reaching out a finger to stroke the side of her cheek. Her skin was so amazingly soft that Isabella felt compelled to bend over the cradle to kiss her little girl on the nose. This, however, woke Marie, who squirmed, frowned, and let out a whining whimper of protest. Now Isabella had an excuse to take her in her arms to “comfort” her. She reached into the cradle and picked up her daughter. Placing her in the crook of her arm, she started very gently bouncing her up and down while she cooed to her. She was so absorbed in her joy with the child that she did not notice her mother stood in the doorway.

The Dowager Queen of Jerusalem watched her daughter in silence. It was good to see her eldest daughter so happy. It was good to see her enjoying motherhood, and even better to know she was at last happy with her husband after two marriages that had each been difficult in different ways. Humphrey de Toron had probably been a sodomite and certainly impotent, never consummating the marriage to Isabella; Conrad de Montferrat had been a good lover but overbearing and self-important, unwilling to recognize Isabella as an intelligent being. Henri de Champagne, in contrast, both adored his bride and respected her as his queen. Seeing Isabella like this was some compensation for the memories of the wreck Isabella had been during her wrenching divorce from Toron, much less the horror of watching Montferrat die in agony in her arms. Maria Zoë found it hard to break in on her

daughter's private joy, knowing that she was going to shatter it the moment she raised the topic of Aimery de Lusignan's arrest.

"Mama!" Isabella noticed her mother at last. "How long have you been standing there?"

"I just arrived," Maria Zoë lied with a smile as she swept into the nursery. "And how is my granddaughter doing today?"

"She's as lovely as ever!" Isabella responded, willingly handing her daughter over to her mother as she offered both cheeks in greeting.

Maria Zoë smiled down at her namesake and bounced her in her arms gently, but when little Marie decided she'd had enough and let out a loud wail, she happily handed her off to the Syrian wet nurse.

Distracted by her mother, Isabella made no attempt to interfere with the nurse, asking instead, "What brings you to Acre? When you left after Christmas Uncle Balian" (as a child Isabella had picked up the habit of referring to her stepfather as "Uncle Balian") "said he didn't expect to be back until after the sowing was finished."

"True. We didn't expect an emergency."

"Emergency? What's happened? Have the rains caused flooding—"

Maria Zoë was shaking her head, "No, no. Shall we sit outside in the fresh air?" She indicated the courtyard bathed in morning sunshine.

Isabella slipped her arm through her mother's, and together they went out into the little courtyard. The sun was pouring in and the surrounding buildings protected it from the wind. They sat down on a plaster bench built against the wall, and Isabella looked expectantly at her mother. "Tell me! What is it?"

"Actually, you must already know," Maria Zoë started cautiously. Her relationship with Isabella was close, but it had also been stormy at times. There had been tense periods when Isabella had been rebellious and aggressive. "Your brother John rode all night to reach us."

"Oh!" Isabella gasped and drew back slightly, her face flushing. "You mean Aimery's arrest. Henri had to!" She defended her husband at once. "He can't risk him plotting against us for another hour! He promised me he would not put him in chains or anything like that, but he had to ensure Aimery could not communicate with his brother or the Pisans!"

Maria Zoë was relieved to hear that Isabella had at least extracted a promise of good treatment; that alone would mean a great deal to Eschiva. More important, it suggested that her daughter was not entirely indifferent to her best friend's husband. To her daughter she asked simply, "What is this all about, Isabella? You've known Aimery all your life. You know he's sacrificed the better part of *his* life for

Jerusalem. How can you think he might have turned traitor now?"

"He's a Lusignan, Mama! And you know his brother has never stopped claiming the crown of Jerusalem. Guy did everything he could to prevent me obtaining what was rightfully mine. He even talked Humphrey into telling me I had no claim as long as he lived. And don't you remember how he tried to ingratiate himself with the Dowager Queen of Sicily, hoping to marry her? He's still looking for a new wife. If he marries again and has children, he will claim Jerusalem for them!" Isabella hardly stopped for breath as she fervently delivered this monologue.

Maria Zoë knew her daughter's passionate nature, and nodded before countering in a reasonable tone, "I don't doubt a word you're saying, Bella. Guy has been an intriguer, a seducer, and arrogantly blind to his own faults for as long as I've known him—which is more than a decade. But Aimery is not Guy—any more than you are Sibylla."

Isabella had always hated her older half-sister Sibylla, so the argument made her catch her breath and start biting her lower lip. Maria Zoë pressed her point. "I know Aimery backed Guy's usurpation six years ago, but he has lived to regret that a thousand times over. He's told me that himself, he's told your stepfather, and he's told your brother the same thing. I honestly do not think that he could be involved in any kind of plot against you or Henri, even *if*—as has not yet been proved—his brother is behind the Pisan pirates preying on our shipping."

Isabella was frowning and biting her lip in distress. "You're probably right, Mama. I *want* to believe you, for Eschiva's sake if nothing more, but arresting him was a precaution Henri *had* to take. If he's innocent, then I'm sure Henri will release him."

Maria Zoë took a deep breath and concluded this was probably the most she could hope to gain at the moment. Pressing Isabella too hard could easily trigger an angry rejection of "interference." It would have been easier to back off, however, if she hadn't spent the night with Eschiva and her children. Eschiva, usually so calm and self-possessed, had broken down and cried in Maria Zoë's arms. Eschiva had lived with Maria Zoë and Balian as a child, and the ties had never weakened. Maria Zoë loved Eschiva like one of her own daughters, and she knew how much Eschiva had suffered over the years—from Aimery's infidelities in his youth, from his captivity after Hattin and his absence at the siege of Acre, and more recently from the uncertainties of this last military campaign under the King of England. She and Aimery had only just started to rebuild their lives—and now this.

"That's really the best I can promise," Isabella spoke into Maria Zoë's thoughts, sounding faintly defiant already.

"I know, Bella," Maria Zoë chose tactical retreat. "That's all I ask." She smiled and kissed her firstborn on the forehead and then stood. "I must get back to Eschiva. She's understandably very distraught and frightened."

"You must assure her that no matter what comes to light about Aimery, she will always be a sister to me. I promise she'll never be made to suffer, even if Aimery is found to be a traitor."

"Ah, but sweetheart, if anything happens to Aimery she *will* suffer, because she loves him—not as you love Henri, nor indeed as I love your stepfather, but as a woman who has known no other husband since she was eight years old. Aimery is her life, Bella. If you take Aimery away, Eschiva will simply die." Maria Zoë patted her daughter's shoulder as if comforting her—but judging by Isabella's stricken face, her message had gone home.

Henri de Champagne, consort of Queen Isabella of Jerusalem, sometimes still felt as if he were a schoolboy who hadn't done his homework. He was not yet twenty-five, and he had not been raised to be a king. Furthermore, the laws of the Kingdom of Jerusalem were unique; he could not just apply his experience from home. He was completely dependent on the (not always patient) explanation of the customs and usages of his wife's kingdom provided by his bishops, barons, and counselors. Sometimes he wondered if everything they told him was absolutely true.

Take the custom of "restor," for example. Who had ever heard of such a thing? But the seneschal and chamberlain both insisted that it was the custom of the Kingdom of Jerusalem that the *king* was responsible for compensating knights and sergeants for horses lamed or killed in battle. This seemed a huge and unreasonable expense to Henri, who pointed out that in France a knight was responsible for supplying his own horses at his own expense.

"You are not in France," the Archbishop of Nazareth, his chancellor, reminded him in an unsympathetic voice.

"Obviously," Henri retorted, annoyed, "but this is quite unreasonable. A knight enjoys his fief and the profits thereof in exchange for owing service *with horse and squire*. If the king assumes the costs of the horse—"

"Only if it has been killed or lamed in his service," the chancellor

corrected him.

"Yes, but that's when most horses are killed!" Henri protested. "You're talking about over fifty horses—Ah! Just the man I need!" Henri had caught sight of the Baron of Caymont in the doorway. "My lord of Ibelin" (everyone still called him Ibelin, even though the land that went with the title was in Saracen hands), "no one knows the laws of the Kingdom better than you, and as you're also an expert on horses, I'm sure you know this one doubly well. Tell me, is it true that the *King* of Jerusalem is responsible for compensating knights and sergeants for horses lost or irreparably injured in battle?"

Ibelin smiled faintly as he came deeper into the room. He bowed his head to the Count of Champagne before answering, "It is called 'restor,' my lord, and it is the law of the land—"

"But I've never heard anything like it," Champagne interrupted in protest.

"The spoils of war go to the King," Ibelin tried to explain, "including the countless Saracen horses we usually capture. I think you'll find that the drain on your treasury is bearable."

"Ah, but don't the Saracens ride mares?" Champagne asked, puzzled.

"They do, but not *only* mares, and sergeants can be compensated with mares or geldings."

"Hmm." Henri did not sound entirely convinced, but he was somewhat mollified, and stood scratching his head as he tried to come to terms with yet another curious custom. Then he started, realizing that Ibelin was supposed to be in Caymont. "What brings you to Acre, my lord? I thought you had planned to stay in Caymont until Easter?"

"I had planned to, yes. My son John, however, rode through the night to bring me word of the Constable's arrest."

"Oh!" Henri's face clouded, and a frown of annoyance crept over his features. Ibelin could almost see him regretting that he had not ordered John's arrest. Since it was too late for that, however, he went on the offensive instead, declaring indignantly, "The Constable's brother Guy has been inciting the Pisans to prey upon shipping bound for Acre. They've seized at least three ships that we know of, and this isn't just piracy! The Lusignan is trying to undermine my authority by proving I cannot protect my subjects, as well as denying me valuable revenue that I would otherwise have from the customs duties on the cargoes of the seized ships."

"That could well be," Ibelin agreed steadily with a glance at the other men in the room, one after another. The chancellor, seneschal, chamberlain, and viscount of Acre each looked away as if ashamed.

He wondered which of them had advised Champagne to arrest the Constable. The Chancellor Archbishop of Nazareth should certainly have known better, he thought, looking again to the senior churchman, but Nazareth had barely escaped Saracen capture after Hattin. The months he had endured in reputedly wild, dangerous, and terrifying circumstances until he finally reached Tripoli had left their mark on him. He was said to bear a bitter, almost ulcerous, grudge against Guy de Lusignan—which was one reason Champagne had selected him as his chancellor. The seneschal Ralph of Tiberius was the younger brother of the Prince of Galilee, and he was likewise an outspoken and bitter opponent of Lusignan. He was also very young, roughly Champagne's own age—which, Ibelin supposed, might have been a factor in his appointment: Champagne probably did not want to be surrounded by old men. That left the chamberlain and viscount. The former was one of Champagne's knights, a man who'd come out to Outremer with him—and was, Ibelin presumed, blindly loyal to his lord while equally ignorant of the laws of Jerusalem. The Viscount of Acre, on the other hand, was the elderly and highly respected Peter de Gibelet, a man with a long history as a juror and counselor of the law. He was well qualified to preside over the Court of the Bourgeoisie—but not the kind of man to challenge a king, even a young and inexperienced one.

"Then you approve of the arrest?" Champagne broke in on his thoughts.

"Of course not," Ibelin answered firmly, turning his attention back to Champagne. "Everything you said pertained to *Guy* de Lusignan; the man you arrested was *Aimery* de Lusignan. He is also the Constable of the Kingdom of Jerusalem."

"Blood is thicker than water, Ibelin. You know that. I cannot trust the brother of a man who is set upon my destruction!" Champagne balled his fist as he spoke, adding passionately, "You saw how Burgundy constantly undermined the authority of my uncle King Richard. I don't want to have to deal with the same situation—where the man who ought to be my deputy is actively working against me, trying to destroy me and humiliate me at every turn!"

Ibelin nodded, thankful for Champagne's candidness. He was beginning to comprehend, and said out loud in a reasonable tone, "I can understand that, my lord. May I sit?"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Champagne was instantly contrite, ashamed of his bad manners. He gestured for Ibelin to take a seat at the table while sending a page to fetch water, wine, and nuts.

Once Ibelin had taken a place at the table, he looked again at the other men gathered around it. The Archbishop of Nazareth looked

wary, the Chamberlain confused, the Viscount and Seneschal worried. Ibelin's eyes circled back to settle on Champagne. "My lord, I doubt any of us here would suggest that you be forced to depend upon a man you do not feel you can trust." This statement elicited vigorous nods from the Chamberlain, but the Chancellor still looked wary and the other two men puzzled. "However," Ibelin continued, "regardless of your personal trust—or lack thereof—in Aimery de Lusignan, he remains the Constable of the Kingdom. I would therefore like to know by what authority he was arrested." As he spoke, Ibelin looked directly at the most experienced jurist in the room. By the way Gibelet sucked in his breath, he was sure he'd hit a nerve.

"I arrested him on my own authority as King, of course," Champagne answered innocently and confidently.

Ibelin met his eyes and took his time answering, but when he did it was to declare bluntly: "You did not have that right."

"What do you mean?" Champagne bristled. "I may not have been anointed King, but—"

"This has nothing to do with being anointed. Even if you were, you would not have the right to arrest any member of the High Court on your own authority. Only the High Court can order the arrest of any member, and I know the High Court did no such thing, because I was not summoned."

The Viscount was nodding vigorously. "My lord of Ibelin is correct, my lord," Gibelet hastened to say. "I tried—"

"A King has executive authority! I can order the arrest of any of my subjects!" Champagne countered hotly.

"Not in Jerusalem," Ibelin answered without raising his voice. "Since the Kingdom was established under Baldwin I, the Kings of Jerusalem rule only with the consent of the High Court, and no member of the High Court can be arrested, sentenced, or deprived of his rights without a judgment of their peers."

Champagne looked to the Archbishop of Nazareth, frowning. "Is that true?"

Nazareth did not look pleased, but he admitted in a clipped voice, "It is."

"What that means," Ibelin continued, "is that if you doubt the Constable's loyalty to the Crown, then you must accuse him of treason before the High Court and let it—the High Court—rule on his guilt or innocence. The Constable has the right to defend himself before, and be judged by, his peers in the High Court."

Champagne looked again to the Archbishop, who shrugged and declared, "Ibelin is correct."

The Viscount jumped in more vigorously to explain. “All justice in the realm is based on judgment by one’s peers, my lord. That’s why we allow Syrian courts and even Muslim courts to operate, and why the Italian communes have their own courts, and why we have separate courts for commercial and maritime disputes.”

Champagne felt slightly dizzy confronted by so many curious customs. They all seemed alien to him, yet he was supposed to enforce them. He wanted to rebel, to say ‘No, I am the King,’ but he knew he could not. He was the interloper, the newcomer, tolerated more than loved. Worse, he owed his position in large part to his close ties to King Richard of England, but the mighty Lionheart had been treacherously seized by the duplicitous Duke of Austria on his way home from the Holy Land and was being held in a German jail, charged with a list of bogus “crimes.” The news of this outrageous affront against a crusader and a fellow king had only arrived this past week with the first ships from the West. Henri was still reeling from it, and it made him less confident than he might otherwise have been. Last but not least, Henri was acutely aware that he owed both his wife and his crown to the man sitting opposite him: it had been Ibelin who had put his name forward as a suitable husband for the abruptly widowed Isabella. He’d been totally unprepared for the suggestion when it was first mooted and had halfway hoped his uncle King Richard would reject the proposal. When he hadn’t, Henri had felt trapped—until Isabella had come to him.

Henri had been in love with Isabella since the first time he saw her during the siege of Acre, and when she stood before him as a widow eighteen months later, he’d been hopelessly enchanted. He wanted *Isabella* far more than he wanted the crown of Jerusalem! But one did not come without the other. And now he was in this absurd situation of being King but not being allowed to act like one!

“What do you expect me to do?” he demanded of Ibelin hotly. “Release a man who is plotting against me and let him continue to undermine my reign and to impoverish my subjects?”

“No—since we do not *know* Aimery de Lusignan is plotting against you. But, yes, I am asking you to release a man you *suspect* of treason long enough for the High Court to be summoned and for you to put your case against him before it.”

“He might flee the country in the meantime!” Champagne protested.

“Then you will be rid of him, and he will be a threat to you no longer.”

“Are you saying the King of Jerusalem does not have the right to punish a man who has committed treason?”

“Not at all. A man *found guilty* of treason *by the High Court* will be

condemned and sentenced. If found guilty, the Constable will be deprived of his office, and banished from the Kingdom."

"If he is found guilty by the High Court?"

"Exactly, by his peers—or, should he so choose, in trial by combat."

Champagne looked again to the Archbishop of Nazareth as if hoping for a different answer, but the prelate, looking sour, admitted, "Ibelin is right, my lord. The Constable can only be condemned and sentenced by the High Court."

"Why didn't you tell me that when I ordered his arrest?" Champagne countered, feeling trapped.

"We tried," the Viscount spoke up; "you were not in the mood to listen."

Champagne glanced at the Seneschal and Chamberlain, but they were young men like himself and while loyal, they were in no position to oppose the three older men. Champagne threw up his hands. "Then I'll summon the High Court!" he decided.

"Before you do," Ibelin warned, "you would be wise to consider the fact that the Constable has many friends in the High Court. He has fought for the Kingdom four times as long as you have, my lord. Taking this allegation of treason before the High Court could divide the lords of the Kingdom. Are you sure you want to do that?"

"No!" Champagne lost his temper. "No, I don't want to do that, but I will not tolerate a traitor at the heart of government, either! The Constable is a senior official of the realm! He commands the army in the absence of the King. I cannot—will not—allow the brother of my worst enemy to hold that position a day longer than necessary!"

"He's right about that," Ralph of Tiberius spoke up for the first time, rushing his words slightly from nervousness. He was intimidated by Ibelin, who had confronted his stepfather the Count of Tripoli over his separate peace with Saladin, led the successful charge at Hattin, conducted an amazing defense of Jerusalem, and negotiated the Peace of Ramla. It took all his courage to speak up against him. "No one should be Constable who *might* have split loyalties. I mean, it's not a matter of whether we can *prove* Lord Aimery has committed treason. It is, as my lord of Champagne said at the start, a matter of *trust*."

Ibelin considered the young seneschal with sympathy and nodded. Then he turned back to Champagne. "If I could speak with the Constable and convince him to resign his office, would you let him go free?"

"Why should he resign? It is his only source of income, and his brother undoubtedly wants him in it so he can aid and abet him in his efforts to usurp my throne."

Ibelin waited until Champagne was finished and then repeated his question. "*If* he agrees to resign, will you let him go free?"

Champagne looked to the others for support, but they were all nodding. The Archbishop of Nazareth remarked sharply, "Ibelin is right. The Constable has more than one friend on the High Court. It will not be easy to get the Court to condemn him, no matter what evidence you bring. It would not be wise to risk your—" he cut himself off to seek the right word and finally settled upon "—credibility with the Court so early in your reign. It would be better to avoid a confrontation with your vassals. If my lord of Ibelin can convince the Constable to resign, it would be the best thing for the Kingdom—and for you."

Champagne's lips were clamped together, his cheeks flushed, but he had his emotions under firm control. He turned back to his wife's stepfather and nodded. "All right, my lord. See if you can talk reason to him, but make sure he knows I will summon the High Court if he doesn't go voluntarily. I will not have a man I *cannot* trust as Constable of the Kingdom."

Ibelin nodded and got to his feet. "Thank you, my lord. You will not regret this decision."

Aimery had seen worse dungeons. The first time he was taken captive by the Saracens he had been nothing but a young landless knight. The Saracens had rapidly assessed his ability to raise a ransom as marginal, and had tossed him into the pit with the other men just barely above the threshold for sale into immediate slavery. He was told he'd be given one year to raise his ransom, and was pointedly reminded that his father had died in Saracen captivity.

That pit had been windowless, foul, and overcrowded. They had shared it with rats, fleas, and lice. Food and water had been lowered to them once a day, and they had sometimes fought over it.

The second time he had been held in Saracen captivity, he had been placed in the large, cavernous cellars of the fortress at Aleppo with a dozen other lords captured at Hattin. Although this dungeon was equally windowless, the roominess had reduced the stench of the place, and the company of his fellow barons had been a comfort. Still, the knowledge that the Kingdom had been overrun and uncertainty about the future had gnawed at his sanity. It was the hope of returning to Eschiva and his children that had helped keep him sane.

But both times in the past he had been a prisoner of war, a man

with some value in terms of ransom, and in no way guilty of any crime. This time he was accused of treason, and if the dungeon was not as filthy or fetid as the first dungeon, it was more ominous nevertheless. The chamber was windowless, no more than ten feet in diameter, and furnished with a straw pallet, a bucket as a privy, and chains. That he had not actually been put *into* the chains was a relief, yet their very presence was a reminder of what might yet come.

It did not help that he was utterly alone. There was no one to offer him comfort, much less hear his confession. As the time stretched out before him, unmeasured by the chiming of the hours or the waxing and waning of daylight, he started to imagine that he might never again see the light of day or hear the sound of a human voice. It had happened before. Men were simply locked away and left to starve to death. Or fed only enough food to keep them lingering for years, as their hair and nails grew and their strength, sight, and soul drained away.

Aimery knew himself well enough to know that he would lose his soul to bitterness without the aid of a priest. It had been a source of great comfort to have the Bishop of Lydda with them in the dungeon at Aleppo. Denied the means to read Mass, the churchman had nevertheless regularly heard their confessions and provided spiritual advice and comfort.

Nor did it help to picture the fate of a traitor's wife and children. No one would hurt them outright, of course, but Eschiva might well be pressured into a new marriage. With four young children, she could not afford the luxury of retiring to a convent. She would have to remarry in order to provide for them, but the children would bear the stigma of "traitor's spawn." The thought made Aimery cringe. Guy was just going on eleven, bright and fun-loving. He'd been a page to King Richard and loved being at the center of things. To find himself the unloved stepson of Eschiva's new husband would shatter him.

And all because of his brother Guy! Aimery had come to hate his brother—for losing the Battle of Hattin, for starting the siege of Acre, for bringing his wife and daughters to that siege where they had soon died, and most of all for—undeserving as he was—being given Cyprus by the King of England.

Aimery's love of Cyprus had started in 1191, when he'd gone to the island with his brothers Guy and Geoffrey. King Richard had been in the midst of conquering the island from the Greek tyrant Isaac Comnenus, after the latter had threatened his wife and bride and broken his word. The Lusignan brothers had been desperate for the King of England's support, because the King of France had declared his support for Conrad de Montferrat's claim to the throne of

Jerusalem. As the liege lord of their eldest brother Hugh, the Lusignans believed Richard Plantagenet *owed* them his support. They could not understand why he was "tarrying."

Of course he wasn't. Richard had simply recognized that Cyprus was vital to the security of the Holy Land, because Cyprus sat astride the sea routes of the Eastern Mediterranean. As long as it was controlled by Franks, it could prevent Saracen fleets from attacking the remaining Christian ports of Tripoli and Tyre. Strategically, it was also an ideal staging ground for launching new attacks on the Saracens, including a campaign against Cairo as a means of forcing the surrender of Jerusalem. Richard the Lionheart had taken control of Cyprus in just one month. He'd chased away the Greek usurper, had taken oaths of fealty from the local nobles, and then had sold the island to the Templars, thinking they would ensure the island remained a bulwark against the Saracens. Richard of England had never seen in Cyprus what Aimery had seen: an island of almost idyllic beauty from its snow-capped mountains to its palm-lined shores, a source of security not in the strategic sense, but economically and emotionally.

After fighting almost two decades in Outremer, Aimery was ready to "settle down." He wanted land he could call his own, land he could cultivate, land he could bequeath. He wanted to sink down roots and leave a legacy. He wanted to plant olive orchards that would still be here at the next millennium. He wanted to build a house for his growing family that would shelter his descendants for generations. It didn't seem such an ambitious dream to him, but it was elusive. Or rather, unrealistic. With the Kingdom of Jerusalem reduced to a quarter of what it had once been, there simply wasn't enough land to go around. Great lords like Tiberius had nothing, let alone men like himself, who had never had claim to a barony.

Cyprus, however, was fertile and sparsely populated. It offered him opportunity—if only it weren't ruled by the brother he had come to hate. And worst of all, Guy didn't even want it. He still coveted the crown he'd lost: Jerusalem. It was madness.

Now this. He was imprisoned for allegedly supporting the brother he detested in his brother's stupid quest for Jerusalem, which he opposed! Guy knew better than to ask Aimery for anything—much less support for his moribund claim to Jerusalem. Guy would make the best witness for the defense, but no one was likely to let Guy testify—even if there was a trial. It would be so much easier to just let him rot here . . .

And then the key turned in the lock and Aimery sprang to his feet. He was a bundle of nerves, and he found himself facing the door,

every muscle so taut he was almost trembling with anticipation. Had they come to slit his throat or simply bring him a meal?

The door was massive, braced, and studded with iron. It swung open only slowly and with a creak. The man who entered had to duck under the door frame, but even before he straightened to his full height, Aimery recognized him and cried out in relief. "Balian!"

"John brought us word immediately," Balian answered, pulling a loaf of bread and a jug of wine out from under his cloak. "I brought these along as well, in case you needed something fortifying."

"Is the news that bad?" Aimery asked at once, tensing again.

"Not at all. I just finished giving Henri de Champagne a lesson in the laws of the land, pointing out that he had no right to arrest you. I have received his assurance—in the presence of the chancellor, chamberlain, seneschal, and viscount of Acre—that he will release you, on one condition."

"What condition?" Aimery asked, wary at once.

"That you resign the office of Constable. The crux of the matter is that Champagne doesn't trust you and doesn't want a man he doesn't trust as his deputy. He's traumatized by the image of what Burgundy did to King Richard. I can't say I blame him. In the circumstances, it doesn't make any difference if you're guilty or not: if he doesn't trust you, he doesn't trust you. Shall we sit while we discuss this?" Ibelin gestured toward the straw pallet.

Aimery nodded absently and sank down onto the crude bed. Ibelin handed him a pottery mug that he'd stashed in an inside pocket of his cloak, and then removed the cork closing the jug to pour wine for Aimery. It was strong red wine, and Aimery swallowed it gratefully. Only after he'd had a few sips did he look hard at Ibelin and ask, "What are you suggesting? That I resign as if I were guilty? And then what? Go beg in the streets?"

"Hardly. You know perfectly well my lady and I will make you and your family welcome at Caymont—such as it is. I can certainly use another pair of hands to dig irrigation ditches!" Ibelin laughed dryly at his own joke. Aimery did not.

They looked at one another.

"We're not the brave young knights we once were, are we?" Ibelin remarked, remembering their youth, when both had been landless knights seeking their fortune at the vibrant court of King Amalric of Jerusalem. Then the Kingdom had stretched far beyond the Jordan . . .

"Is that my only choice? Resign and live on charity or rot here?"

"No. You can defend yourself before the High Court of Jerusalem. You have many friends there—and, unlike Champagne, they've known

you for decades. You stand a good chance in the High Court." He paused before adding, "Then again, many on the High Court hate your brother. If you lose, you'll be banned from the Kingdom, such as *it* is. Or, you could choose trial by combat and put your future and that of your family in the hands of God."

Aimery tipped the mug up and drank in deep gulps, then held the mug out to Ibelin for more. He was beginning to understand how this man had managed to extract concessions from the victorious Saladin in impossible situations. He certainly had a way of making you see the risks of any decision! "What does Eschiva want me to do?"

"I haven't asked her. I came straight here."

"And your lady?"

"The same. I haven't had a chance to talk to her, but she did go to her daughter to plead your case. I daresay she will have succeeded in making Isabella feel guilty."

Aimery's lips turned up in acknowledgment of the debt he owed the Dowager Queen. Out loud he confined himself to remarking, "Indeed, she can be very persuasive." He paused and then remarked with a deep sigh, "I gather you think I should take this offer to resign?"

"I do. I don't want your case to come before the High Court, because it will tear the Kingdom apart, and we've just barely patched it back together again. Champagne's rule is far too fragile as it is. And it *certainly* doesn't help that the King of England is rotting in a German jail. No one is going to come to our aid if al-Afdal, hothead that he is, decides to break his father's truce. We're entirely on our own, and our resources are tiny. The only thing that keeps me from despair is Cyprus."

"Cyprus," Aimery echoed wistfully.

"Yes. It's rich enough to feed us, close enough to receive us, and it could be a source of men and materiel, too—if it were in the hands of a good lord."

"Meaning my brother is not?"

"Is he?"

"God help us all!" Aimery threw up his hands.

"Amen. But assuming the Lord helps those who help themselves, then the first step might be for *you* to go to Cyprus."

"Are you crazy? Guy told me flat-out he didn't need my help and he didn't want it!"

"That was before Geoffrey gave up on him and sailed back for France," Ibelin pointed out.

Aimery thought about that. There was something to it. Their older

brother Geoffrey had been pulling Guy's strings ever since he came out to Outremer in 1188. While he didn't share Aimery's resentment of Guy, he had shared his assessment of him. Geoffrey had counted on Guy being fully restored to his kingdom and so receiving from him the rich county of Jaffa and Ascalon for himself. When King Richard recognized first Montferrat and then Champagne as the rightful King of Jerusalem, and—worse still—bartered away Ascalon in the Treaty of Ramla, Geoffrey had lost interest in the Holy Land altogether. He'd gone with Guy to Cyprus the previous fall, only to sail for France this spring. Guy was now alone on Cyprus with only a handful of followers.

"It's worth a try," Ibelin prodded.

If only you knew how you are tempting me, Aimery thought, his memories of Cyprus starting to banish the walls of his prison. And why shouldn't he give in to this temptation? What did he have to lose? His position as Constable was precarious at best and deadly at worst. Champagne would almost certainly find a new excuse to imprison him—assuming he could even talk himself out of the charges he'd already leveled.

"Eschiva and the children can stay with us, of course," Ibelin sweetened the lure even more.

Aimery knew that the happiest years of Eschiva's life had been when she lived with Balian and Maria. Caymont wasn't Ibelin, of course, but she'd be with people she loved and trusted. The children would be in the countryside where they could grow up in the fresh air, riding, swimming, and climbing trees with their cousins. And maybe, just maybe, he could talk his brother into giving him that slice of Cyprus that he so desperately coveted. Outwardly he shrugged to disguise his inner excitement. "You're right. It's worth a try."

Ibelin's face broke into a smile, and then he flung his arms around the prisoner. They hugged each other in mutual relief before Ibelin got to his feet and pulled a still somewhat benumbed Aimery up after him.

Aimery was feeling slightly manipulated, yet comforted himself with the thought that he was in good company. Ibelin was the man who had reconciled Tripoli with Lusignan, obtained terms for a city already conquered, and secured a kingdom already lost. What chance had he against the Great Negotiator?

Meanwhile Ibelin pounded on the door with his fist and demanded, "Open the door! The Constable has resigned!"

“Please, my lord,” John pleaded earnestly with his father. He was dressed in his chain-mail hauberk and straining to look as mature as possible. “I want to go with Lord Aimery. It’s my place. As his squire.”

Balian frowned. Watching his eldest son grow into a resourceful, responsible, and yet optimistic young man was one of his greatest joys. He did not like being separated from John at all, but up to now he’d been in Acre, only a few hours away. Balian had been able to visit him, or call him home, on short notice. Cyprus was different. Cyprus was across the water, a strange and unfamiliar place. He knew Aimery would do his best to look out for John, but ultimately they were both at the mercy of Guy de Lusignan—the last man on earth Balian trusted.

“Has Lord Aimery asked you to go with him?” Balian growled, preparing to give the former Constable a piece of his mind.

“No, he didn’t. He told me I was released from his service, but I—I told him I wanted to go with him.” John stumbled a little over his words.

Balian knew his son well, and by his reaction quickly guessed he had already pledged himself to Aimery. “Did you give him your word?”

John swallowed guiltily, but stood his ground. “Yes, my lord.”

“You had no right to do that without my permission,” Balian reminded his son sharply.

“My lord—Papa—Lord Aimery’s completely alone! You know how much Guy hates him. He’s as likely to throw Lord Aimery out of his court as Champagne did—”

“Yes, exactly, so what good will *you* being there do?” Balian retorted dismissively.

To his father’s astonishment, John had a ready answer. Meeting his father’s eye, John declared firmly, “I can make sure his armor glistens and his spurs gleam and ensure that no one can sneer at him for a beggar. I can show him the respect he deserves, and in so doing shame them. Most of all, I can remind them of where you stand, my lord. I can remind them that the Lord of Ibelin holds Aimery de Lusignan in greater honor than either claimant to the crown of Jerusalem.”

Balian caught his breath and held it. When he let it out it was with a sense of rueful respect. “If you don’t master the sword and lance, John, you can make your living in the courts.”

“Does that mean I can go with Lord Aimery?” John jumped at the unspoken shift in his father’s stance.

“Yes, damn it. It means you may go with him, but don’t think I can’t come after you! If I have any reason to think you’re not safe, not

keeping good company, or not remembering your duty to God, I will haul you back to Caymont and make you dig irrigation ditches with me!"

John broke into a smile of relief and excitement. He flung his arms around his father with a heartfelt, "Thank you, father! You won't regret this! Wait and see—Lord Aimery plans to demand land from his brother, and when he does, he'll reward me, too. We'll have something for Philip and a dowry for Margaret. I promise you, Father, I'll make our family richer and stronger!"

Balian shook his head at so much youthful optimism and enthusiasm, but held his son tight for a moment before stepping back with sigh of resignation and capitulation to warn, "You're very young, John. You have a lot to learn, and not all of what you need to learn will be pleasant. Whatever happens, remember who you are: that the blood of the Eastern Roman Emperors runs in your veins."

John sobered immediately and looked at his father squarely and earnestly. "I won't forget that; but even more, I won't forget that I am the son of Balian d'Ibelin, the man who saved the *people* of Jerusalem."

The unexpected blow almost felled his father. He could only defend himself by embracing his son a second time in gratitude and pride.

Chapter Three
Encounters in Seaside Taverns

Caesarea, Kingdom of Jerusalem
April 1193

THE WIND WAS HOWLING AROUND THE corners of the stone buildings crowding the little harbor. It chased anything not tied down along the streets and rattled the shutters of the warehouses and taverns. Waves crashed against the sea wall, sending spumes twenty feet into the air before the water cascaded down in tatters on the glistening surface of the massive stones. The ships huddling in the shelter of the harbor were tossed about on the swells, their masts rolling from side to side and their rigging banging incessantly. The galley captain had been right when he'd refused to sail yesterday, John registered to himself. At the time, Lord Aimery and he had been extremely annoyed (and the former a little insulting) about the captain's refusal to put to sea. Now that Lord Aimery had taken leave of his family, he was anxious to quit the Kingdom. By the look of the weather, however, it might be two or three days before the wind let up and the seas settled.

Unfortunately, the Lord of Caesarea, a friend and supporter whose hospitality they had counted on, was unexpectedly absent. They'd been forced to rent a room at a tavern near the Cathedral of St. Paul. This had seemed a final insult to Lord Aimery, and he had retreated into the room in a bad mood. John could understand how he felt, but he couldn't stand being cooped up in the small, stuffy room with a brooding Lord Aimery, either. With the excuse of "checking on the horses," he had extricated himself. The horses, however, had been fine, contentedly nibbling at their hay nets, so he had decided to take a walk along the harbor front. He was enjoying the spectacle of the waves shattering on the outer wall built by the Romans. Each wave flung up fountains of glistening water that caught the sunlight. It wasn't cold, although a bank of clouds hung over the Western horizon, threatening rain by nightfall.

The waterfront was all but deserted. The ships were battened down to withstand the storm, and both loading and offloading were too difficult with the swells bashing vessels against the sides of the quay.

Only at one of the many taverns had a couple of tables been set up in the lee of a large warehouse. John decided to pause for a glass of ale and a bite to eat. (John was always hungry, but Lord Aimery had largely lost his appetite since leaving his family behind.) Only one other customer, an old salt staring morosely into his pottery mug, was braving the wind. John chose a table with a good view of the harbor and settled himself.

His father had given him a purse of coins so he would not be entirely dependent on Lord Aimery. His father had stressed that he should always have the cost of the passage home tucked safely away "just in case." John had conscientiously sewn this sum and a little more (to cover meals and such) inside one of his boots. Even so, there still seemed to be a lot of copper and silver coins weighing down his purse. He felt an "obligation" to lighten the load a little.

The fact was, this was the first time in his life that he'd ever had his own purse and the right to spend money as he pleased. Not that John had any intention of wasting his money "foolishly," but it made him feel "grown up" to sit down at a table, signal the proprietor over, and ask what he had to offer.

"Fish soup, pig's feet, and cabbage stuffed with rice and cheese," the Syrian proprietor answered, eyeing John suspiciously. He might be tall for his age, but he had no need to shave, his limbs were thin, and his chest hadn't filled out. He looked like the teenager he was.

"I'll take the pig's feet and your best ale," John answered with a shrug, to imitate nonchalance and familiarity with something that was actually novel.

"If you can't pay, boy, I'll haul you inside by your big ears and make you work off the price of the meal in the kitchen," the proprietor warned gruffly.

"I can pay," John answered indignantly.

The proprietor huffed off, and John returned to watching the entertainment offered by the waves and the boats in the harbor until a big dog with a thick coat of shaggy brown hair came around the corner from the nearest alleyway and stopped to stare at him. John had always wanted a dog, but after they were driven out of Ibelin and had to live in cramped quarters, his mother firmly prohibited dogs from the house. He'd tried to befriend some strays, but they all disappeared somehow. This dog immediately captured John's sympathy, because the wind was blowing hard enough to reveal his scrawny skeleton underneath his fur. Furthermore, he looked at John with large, intelligent eyes. After a glance over his shoulder, he padded forward to sit three feet away from John. From here he watched John solemnly—until the proprietor arrived with a dripping

bowl, a wooden spoon, and the mug of ale. Immediately the dog ran a dozen feet away before stopping to look over his shoulder. No sooner was the proprietor gone than the dog returned. Reading John's mood correctly, he now risked coming closer, his ears half cocked, his nose lifted, and his tail swaying slowly from side to side, hopeful but wary.

John reached into his bowl of stewed pig's feet, removed one, and tossed it to the dog. With practiced ease the dog snatched the morsel in his teeth, but rather than gulping it down and waiting for more, he darted with his prize around the corner to the alley. John was sorry to think people had made him so afraid. But he soon returned, and since the pig's feet weren't very good, John shared another one and then two. Each time, the dog disappeared around the corner to eat.

Having given most of his meal away to the dog, John was still hungry when he'd finished, so he ordered a loaf of bread and sausage. The proprietor put his hands on his hips and looked down at him. "You'll have to clean pots for two days to work that off!" he warned.

John indignantly showed the proprietor his purse to prove he could pay, and the man shrugged and retreated. Too late, John noticed that the man at the next table had also seen him show his purse, and he started to feel a little nervous. He'd been so absorbed in the dog that he'd failed to notice that the establishments around him were starting to come to life as the sun went down. The tables were filling up.

To distract himself from his own foolishness, John looked for the dog again. He was waiting as before, watching with big solemn eyes what John would do next. John patted the side of his thigh. "Come here, boy!"

The dog took a step closer, and then another, but then lost his courage. A moment later the landlord returned with John's second order and the dog retreated in guilty haste. As soon as the latter was gone, John tore off the end of the loaf of bread and tossed it to the dog. The dog at once disappeared around the corner, only to return shortly. John cut off a piece of sausage and held it out to the dog, trying to get him to come closer. He stepped nearer, his ears lifted and his tail thrashing the air, but he could not actually eat from John's hand. John gave up and threw it to him, and again he disappeared with it.

By now all the tables were full, and the men at them were starting to make John feel uncomfortable. John didn't like the looks the women were giving him, either; they were both patronizing and predatory. But the men were worse. John saw or imagined that some of them were eyeing him like "easy pickings." When he noticed the man who had watched him show his purse to the proprietor elbow the man beside him, he put his hand to his hilt. This only made a man

with an ugly scar on his neck and a mouth full of broken teeth smirk at him condescendingly; his expression implied contempt for both John's sword and his ability to wield it.

It was time to get out of here, John concluded, shivering as the first drops of rain sprinkled from the now overcast sky. He called for his bill, paid off the proprietor with an (unintentionally excessive) tip, and rose to return to his lodgings. To avoid the clientele on the dockside, he decided to return through the town, and so turned into the same alley where the dog had always disappeared. Almost at once he tripped and nearly fell headlong over a man wrapped in a blanket.

The dog was beside him and jumped up with a defensive bark, followed by a hopeful wagging of his tail as he recognized John. John found himself looking down into the face of a skeletal man. Although his hand was completely covered by the blanket he was clutching around himself, it still held the half loaf of bread John had given the dog. The dog had been feeding *him*, John registered in amazement. Embarrassed by the whole situation, John turned and hastened back the way he'd come.

Lord Aimery had already gone to bed when John returned, and only grunted something about it taking "rather long to look after the horses." John apologized, admitted he'd stopped for something to eat, and offered to fetch something for his lord. Lord Aimery said he wasn't hungry and turned his back on John.

John undressed himself and got into the other side of bed, but he couldn't sleep. As the rain grew heavy and splattered against the shutters of the rented room, he pictured the man in the alley clutching at his wet dog for warmth. Why had he run away? The man was obviously harmless. Indeed, the very loyalty of the dog suggested he was kind to it. John shuddered at the thought of sleeping in the alley on a night like this. But why did the old man do it? Why didn't he seek out the hospice of St. John?

John's guilt was increasing. His father had sacrificed his entire inheritance, including the lovely and rich barony of Ibelin, to secure the release of twenty thousand Christians from Saracen slavery. His father said they had no right to a barony when so many Christians did not own even their bodies. Yet there were so many of them, and none of them had money, land, or jobs. John was certain that the man in the alley was a returned captive. Unable to sleep, he resolved to return the following morning to bring the man a loaf of bread and a round of cheese—unless the winds died down and they could sail, of course.

The next morning, the wind was stronger than ever and laced with showers. John bought a loaf of bread and cheese and returned to the

alley beside the harbor-side tavern. When he came around the corner (half hoping there would be no one there), he found the man rolled against the wall, completely covered by his filthy and ragged blanket.

At the sight of John, the dog sprang to his feet and started howling piteously. It wasn't the defensive barking of the day before, but a mournful wailing that made the hair stand up on the back of John's neck. The man beside him didn't move.

"Hello!" John called out, instinctively keeping his distance. "Hello! I've brought you bread and cheese, but you really ought to go to the brothers of St. John."

The man under the blanket didn't stir.

"Christ!" John muttered to himself. His instincts were screaming, "Run away," but that would be cowardly, and Ibelins were not cowards. "Hello! Wake up!" he called louder still, with the same response: none at all.

Swallowing down his revulsion, John took a step nearer, and with the toe of his boot he nudged the man in the back. The slight jostling made him roll away from the wall and sprawl out at John's feet. The hand that had been clutching the blanket flopped down, opening the blanket to reveal the man more clearly. John gasped in horror. The man was a leper! And he was very clearly dead.

Crossing himself fervently, John said a prayer for the dead man's soul, and turned to flee. He should have told the brothers of St. John about the man yesterday, he admonished himself. They would have taken him to the brothers of St. Lazarus. Maybe if he'd spent the night in the leprosarium he could have survived. "Forgive me, Father," he muttered to himself in guilt. "Forgive me, Father, I didn't know. . . ." But he could have looked harder, or asked, or just gone to the good brothers, his conscience said.

John fled from his crime of negligence—only to be stopped in his tracks by the howling of the dog. Poor thing. He'd just lost his master, John registered, and he stopped and looked back. The dog stopped howling and looked at him with big, mournful eyes. "Do you want to come with me, boy?" he asked the dog.

The dog looked back sadly.

"Here." John held out the loaf of bread. "It's all for you, now," he told the dog.

The dog looked at the bread, up at his face, back at the bread, up at his face. But he didn't move.

"You'll have to come and get it. I won't bring it to you," John told him.

The dog took a step forward, then stopped to look back at the

corpse. His chest was heaving as if the parting hurt him physically. John broke down. He crossed the distance to the dog, went down on one knee beside him and, stroking his head, gave him the loaf of bread. The dog took it in his teeth, only to drop it on the ground. Again he looked over his shoulder at his dead master, and then up at John again.

"If you come with me, boy, I'll take care of you." *If Lord Aimery lets me*, John added under his breath. "But first we'll go to the brothers of St. Lazarus, and pay them to bury your master and say a Mass for him." The thought made John feel better, and getting back to his feet he set off in the direction of the leprosarium—with frequent checks to be sure the dog was trailing him.

At the leprosarium John rang the bell, and informed the lay brother who answered that he had seen the corpse of a leper lying in an alley by the quay. The man, himself a leper, nodded, "That'll be old Oliver! We warned him he'd end like this—but, no, he was too good to live with the likes of us! Old ornery bastard! Don't worry about him, boy. We'll collect his rotten bones and see they get underground." Then he held out the palm of his fingerless hand for alms.

John dutifully pulled out his purse and dropped a dinar into the leper's palm with a sense of relief for having done his Christian duty. But as he went to put the purse away again he also noticed how much lighter it felt than the day before. Had he really gone through most of his coins already?

The chiming of the church bells ringing terce made him realize he was long overdue at his lodgings. He'd told Lord Aimery he was just nipping out for breakfast. As he hastened across town with the dog still trailing him, he started to prepare his arguments for keeping the dog. When he reached their lodgings, rather than plunging inside, he stopped and patted the side of his leg. "Come here, boy."

The dog hesitantly came nearer, then stopped with wary looks at his surroundings.

John returned the half-dozen steps to the dog and went down on one knee to scratch him behind his ears. The dog closed his eyes in contentment. John explained, "I'm going to ask Lord Aimery if I can keep you, but you'll have to wait for me here."

The dog gazed at him solemnly.

John got back to his feet, but before turning to go inside he bent to pet the dog one more time. "One way or the other, I'll be back and see that you get a decent meal. I promise."

The dog finally wagged his tail a couple of times, as if hope of some kind was returning.

"John!" The voice of Lord Aimery from the window overhead made John jump. Aimery had opened the shutter and was looking down into the street. "Just bring the cur in with you!"

"My lord?"

"Bring the shaggy mutt inside so we can wash the fleas out of his hair before we go aboard ship."

"You mean I can keep him?" John asked hopefully.

"Why not? He reminds me of the flea-bitten mongrel I had at your age."

The smile that broke out on John's face brightened the day for Aimery. It was going to be just the two of them for an indefinite period to come, and Aimery was determined to ensure John had no reason to regret his decision to come to Cyprus. Besides, John was his best means of ensuring Ibelin's support in the future.

Lord Aimery insisted on calling the dog "Barry" in honor of his father-in-law and John's uncle, the Baron of Ramla and Mirabel. John wasn't entirely sure that was a compliment to either of them—but then, Lord Aimery's relationship with his wife's father had often been strained. John's own memories of his uncle were few, and were overshadowed by his uncle's dramatic decision to go into self-imposed exile rather than take an oath of fealty to Guy de Lusignan. The entire Kingdom had been amazed by such a dramatic gesture of contempt for the usurper, and John's father stressed the nobility of putting one's principles ahead of one's interests. John's mother, on the other hand, noted that compromise was the essence of politics, and suggested that the good of the Kingdom sometimes had to come ahead of one's personal feelings. Either way, John could not remember his uncle ever smiling, so the name in some ways fit the melancholy dog. Still, John couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't the idea of giving commands to "Barry" that made Lord Aimery name the dog after his father-in-law.

Of course, it didn't matter to John as long as Barry was accepted into their little traveling party of two humans, four horses (two for Lord Aimery, Centurion, and their packhorse) and, now, a dog. The galley captain made no objection to Barry, simply confining him below deck with the horses, and they set sail shortly after sunrise on Palm Sunday.

John and Lord Aimery stood on the stern watching the land recede until there was nothing to see, not even the spires of the churches. John was acutely conscious that he had left his homeland for the first

time in his life, and it frightened him a little. Some evil voice was whispering, “You might never see it again, or your father or mother or brother and sisters. . . .”

For Lord Aimery, on the other hand, the severing of ties seemed to have a liberating effect. He took a deep breath of sea air, then looked down at John with a slight smile on his face and declared: “Well, lad, we’re committed now. Let’s go up to the bow and look forward rather than back.”

Together they made their way across the waist of the ship, which was increasingly pitching and rolling as they headed into more open waters, and pulled themselves up by the ladders onto the forepeak. Here spume from the waves breaking on the bow made the planking wet, and now and again a wave broke in greater force, splattering water, but Lord Aimery just laughed and took a firm hold on the railing.

“Cyprus,” he told John, “is the closest thing to Paradise on earth. It’s fertile, gets plenty of rain, and has massive forests full of game. You can grow anything on Cyprus—olives, wine, wheat and barley, citrus trees and sugar cane.” That sounded no different than home to John, but he just nodded, happy to see Lord Aimery’s spirits picking up.

As the wind got colder, however, they retreated to the shelter of the main deck and accepted an invitation from the captain to join him for the midday meal. The captain of this vessel was Venetian. He was a wiry, darkly tanned man with a neatly trimmed beard already flecked with grey. His eyes sat deep in their sockets and seemed almost permanently focused on the horizon, shunning eye contact with humans. He was taciturn, which had suited Aimery well enough up to now, because he was traveling incognito and had not wanted any questions asked. Now he was in the mood for talking, and he sought to draw the man out more.

“Tell us of affairs on Cyprus,” he urged.

The Captain raised his eyebrows. “I thought you knew.”

“I have not been there for about a year.”

The Venetian remarked rather grimly, “Much has happened since.”

“Are you from Cyprus?” Lord Aimery asked next.

“Me? I was born in Constantinople. My brothers and I were one of the few crews that managed to escape impoundment by the Emperor Manuel when he treacherously imprisoned the entire Venetian commune and confiscated our property! My father was not so lucky. He was arrested on his way down to the harbor, and is still in a dungeon in Constantinople—for nothing! For simply being a Latin!”

the Venetian spat out furiously, and Aimery thought he was beginning to understand his dour temperament. The man was being eaten from the inside by hate and guilt.

"But the Emperor Manuel was friendly to the Kingdom of Jerusalem," John burst out, forgetting his place in his eagerness to defend his mother's great-uncle.

"Friendly? When he wanted to be!" the Venetian snarled back.

"He sent his nieces to marry our kings, and he married his only son to the Princess of Antioch," John reminded him, with a glance at Lord Aimery requesting both forgiveness and permission for speaking up. The latter gave both with a shrug.

"A lot of good that did!" the Venetian retorted. "She only made the mob hate us Latins more. When they turned on the Genoans and Pisans, they didn't just arrest them as Manuel did us: they tortured and slaughtered them." There was, Aimery thought, almost satisfaction in the Venetian's voice as he reported the fate of the men from rival city-states who had sought to profit from Venetian misfortune.

"You can't trust the Greeks," the Venetian added. "They lie and cheat and stab you in the back at the first opportunity. They do that even with their own—look how Andronicus killed his nephew Alexius, and then the mob tore him to pieces, and put Isaac Angelus in his place—a nobody and a coward."

John had heard this from his mother, too, and nodded.

"But they'll do it first and foremost to any Latin. Take my word for it, they hate us all, and they will cheat us any way they can. Richard of England did Christendom a favor when he seized Cyprus from the Greeks." The captain continued, "But then the Templars took over," the captain complained, adding viperously: "A covetous and bigoted Order!"

John had been raised to respect the Knights Templar. His father had frequently praised their discipline on the battlefield and their piety. "What do you mean?" he challenged the captain, with a quick look at his lord to be sure he was still going to be allowed to speak up.

"The Templars are bankers first and knights second, believe me! They are more interested in amassing wealth than in fighting for the Holy Land!"

Worlds were clashing—the mercantile world of the Venetians with the chivalric world of Aimery and John—and both the latter looked shocked. This time John did not need to speak, because Aimery himself hastened to defend the Templars. "You speak out of place, Captain. I have seen how selflessly the Templars fight—at Hattin and

Arsuf. More: I saw the survivors of Hattin cruelly and brutally executed by Muslim Sufis after the Battle. They were brave and pious men!"

"Oh, the sheep for the slaughter may be brave and selfless enough, but their leaders are more grasping than the Pope himself!" His passengers only looked more offended at this remark, so the Captain dismissed them as naive and stupid, remarking disdainfully, "Well, don't take my word for it; but if you plan to spend any time on Cyprus, you'll have the pleasure of reaping the consequences of Templar greed. They tried to tax too many and too much, and the people rose up in rebellion. You'll see. Taxation and the persecution of the Orthodox Church have turned all Cypriots into our enemies. Never meddle with a man's faith, if you want to live at peace with him," the captain advised; he downed the rest of his wine standing before pounding up the ladder and back on deck.

Their ship put in at the small fishing port of Famagusta.** Lord Aimery would have preferred to land at Limassol. As the main port on the south coast of the island, Limassol had a cathedral and a royal castle, where they could have requested hospitality. Their captain, however, flatly refused to sail on, pointing out, "You paid for passage to Cyprus and didn't quibble about which port when we struck the price." Aimery now was beginning to suspect the captain of smuggling, and that he wanted to avoid ports at which customs officials could be expected—but Aimery was in no position to challenge the Venetian, so they disembarked at Famagusta.

The town appeared poor and rundown. There were no more than a half-dozen churches, all Greek Orthodox, a small marketplace surrounded by shops under an arcade, and a collection of narrow whitewashed houses with flat roofs. There were only two inns offering rooms, neither of which looked free of fleas—but it was rapidly getting dark by the time Aimery and John offloaded their goods and horses, and they could not ride in the dark on unfamiliar roads to a place they had never been.

They agreed on the least disreputable-looking of the two inns, put the horses in the pathetic shed that was identified as the "stables," and then settled into the tavern for wine and a meal, with Barry clinging unhappily to their heels. There were only four tables in the entire tavern, and none were taken when they first sat down.

Before their meal was dumped in front of them by a slovenly and resentful landlord, all the other tables had been occupied—and served.

That they were kept waiting so long while the others were served first was obviously intentional and insulting, but the alternative was not to eat, so Aimery kept his temper in check. He did, however, feel bad that John's first impression of Cyprus was so poor.

John, on the other hand, was far less disappointed than Aimery suspected. The very rundown, seedy character of the town suggested "adventure" to John, who shared his lord's suspicions about their captain. John had convinced himself the Venetian was really a former pirate now engaged in smuggling. Which meant he was now in a smugglers' den, John reasoned. Furthermore, being surrounded by people speaking Greek underlined the fact that they had left the familiar behind.

John had learned Greek in the schoolroom from a Greek priest who had accompanied his mother as a bride to the Court of Jerusalem. Father Angelus had been one of John's two tutors and responsible for both the language and the history of the Greeks, as well as mathematics and geometry. John had practiced Greek with his mother now and again because it pleased her, but he had never been terribly enthusiastic about the language. Now, as his ears began to separate words from the flood of sounds, he found himself straining to understand more.

"Please" and "thank you," "another," "more," "wine," "good," and the like were easily understood, but while Lord Aimery slipped again into his thoughts, John started to pick up whole phrases. "Who do you think they are?"

"Franks; that's enough for me."

John caught his breath and tried to look over at the men talking about them without being obvious about it. Pretending to look for the proprietor, he let his eyes slide over the men at the table to the right. They looked like farmers to him, except for a young Orthodox monk with a thick black beard under a wide nose. John didn't dare let his eyes linger. Finding the proprietor, he signaled and called for more wine—in French. Instinctively he shied away from using Greek, both because he didn't trust his knowledge of the language entirely and because some part of his brain suggested it might be better if the others didn't know he understood them.

"The one's a knight," the conversation continued.

"Another [something John didn't understand] looking to [incomprehensible] us dry."

The proprietor brought the wine jug and then turned his back to serve the table on the right.

"Yes, yes," John heard the proprietor say. "They're staying here. I

put them in the back room over the latrines."

Laughter answered him.

John felt something creep up his spine. "I don't think they like us here," he remarked to Lord Aimery, reaching down to pet Barry as he spoke. The dog's presence at his feet was somehow reassuring.

"What?" Aimery had been deep in an imaginary conversation with his brother Guy.

"I don't think they like us here."

Aimery looked around and shrugged. "What makes you think that? They'll like our money well enough. I'm tired. Let's go to our room. You can bring the wine with you if you like."

John would have preferred to stay and see what more he could understand, but he was in service and his lord wanted to go to bed. He took the wine and both their pottery mugs and followed Lord Aimery to the chamber they had been given. Barry, John noted, slunk behind them with his belly so close to the floor he collected dirt on his belly hairs, and his tail hung limply. John smiled reassurance at him, but Barry answered by looking up with questioning eyes. Barry didn't like it here either, John concluded.

The room they had been given had a low ceiling dark with grime, a box bed with straw covered by a blanket, and a window closed by partially broken shutters. The window overlooked the shed that housed the latrines, and the broken shutters let in the stench.

Aimery swore and kicked out at the bed. "Shit house!"

"I'll go ask for another room," John volunteered, and without waiting for an answer, turned and scampered back down to the tavern. At the foot of the stairs he stood still in the shadows and surveyed the scene. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he could smell the hostility, and something frightened him. He just couldn't pinpoint what it was.

He caught sight of the proprietor as he left the stairwell and approached him. "The room stinks," he announced. "My lord wants another."

"I don't have another," the proprietor answered sullenly, with a glance in the direction of the men sitting with the young monk. Then he shoved John out of his way.

Rather than retreating back up the stairs, John slipped out into the courtyard to check on the horses. It was a good thing he did. They greeted him with indignant snorts and whinnies. Centurion kicked at the stall door so hard it leapt on its hinges, and John was sure it would break if he kept it up. Checking their feed boxes, John realized they had been given nothing at all; worse, there were no water

buckets in their stalls.

John started to get angry. Whatever these people had against Lord Aimery and himself, they had no right to take it out on the innocent horses. Simmering with resentment, John led each horse to the open trough and let them drink their fill. He then helped himself to the barley in a sack near the tack room, giving a scoop to each horse. While they devoured this, he looked around for hay and spotted it in the loft. He scrambled agilely up the ladder and was just about to throw a bale down when voices below him made him freeze.

"… came on the Venetian galley."

"From Caesarea, then?"

"I say we [incomprehensible] tonight."

"They are armed."

"You can't count the boy."

"Wait until they are both asleep. Costas will give you the key."

"With your blessing, Brother Zotikos?"

"Go with God and do His work!" The monk made the sign of the cross over the other man's head. John could see the monk's face clearly. He was burly but handsome in a solid, powerful way with a full, dark beard. His most powerful feature, however, were eyes that burned with passion as they caught the light of the torches inside the tavern.

"The boy, too?" the second man asked. He was standing with his back to John, and all John could make out was that he was broad-shouldered and had long hair.

"It is as wise to kill a small viper as a large one," the monk answered, and then, taking his donkey by the halter, he led it out of the stables followed by the others.

John was left paralyzed behind them. He was certain that these men meant to kill Lord Aimery and himself in the night—but how could he convince Lord Aimery of that?

After giving hay to the horses, John returned to the stinking room. Lord Aimery was sitting on the bed with the wine jug at his feet. He looked expectantly at John. "Did you get us another room?"

"No, of course not. The proprietor put us here intentionally. My lord, I overheard two men talking about killing us."

"Don't be silly."

"I swear, my lord." and without stopping for breath he spilled out the whole story of what he had overheard.

Aimery gazed at him in apparent disbelief, but his brain was working, too. He was beginning to wonder if the Venetian captain

were in cahoots with these men, or if they were simply facing anti-Latin hatred. But there had been no hostility to Latins two years ago, Aimery argued with himself. The Greeks, high and low, had welcomed Richard of England. The nobles had flooded into Limassol to offer homage, and the common people had lined the roads to offer him bread and salt. Isaac had been defeated as much by the hatred of his subjects as by the prowess of the Lionheart.

The captain had blamed the Templars, Aimery recalled, but what had his brother been doing since? He looked up at John. "We're not going to get much sleep in this shit-hole anyway. Let's take the horses and find ourselves a place to camp."

John let out a sigh of relief and agreed with alacrity, "Yes, my lord!"

"No need to pay the landlord for his hospitality," Aimery decided next, getting to his feet. "Let's slip out as silently as possible. You go down first, like you're going to the latrines, and saddle up. I'll follow in a few minutes with our gear."

"Yes, my lord! Come on, Barry!" John patted his thigh and the dog, who had been lying with his head on his paws, jumped up with wagging tail to follow him.

In the stables, John first got Lord Aimery's palfrey tacked up and then Centurion, while Barry kept watch at the door warily. It seemed a long time before Lord Aimery loomed in the stable door, but he had their gear, and together they tied it on the packhorse. From the tavern came the sound of men grumbling and calling for their bills. "Closing time!" John whispered to Lord Aimery.

"They'll all be coming out, then," Lord Aimery drew the correct conclusion. "Hurry."

John grabbed the lead of the packhorse and took Centurion by the bridle, while Lord Aimery took charge of his two horses. They made it out into the courtyard, but before they had a chance to mount, men spilled from the tavern into the yard.

"Mount!" Lord Aimery hissed at John, but before he could even get his foot in the stirrup one of the Greeks lunged at John, drawing a knife as he did so.

John saw the steel blade in the darkness and tried to jump aside, only to collide with the packhorse. He felt the blade hit his side and then slide over the rings of his hauberk. The man drew his arm back for a second strike as, with the clatter of hooves, Lord Aimery spurred forward, his sword raised. Most of the crowd fled to the safety of the building, but the attacker grabbed John by the throat of his hauberk with his left hand and swung about, using John as his shield against

Lord Aimery's sword. John felt him draw back his right hand for a second stab. In his mind he registered that at this range his chain mail wouldn't save him.

Suddenly his assailant was screaming in pain and terror as Barry sank his fangs deep into the man's buttocks and dragged him away from John. Immediately Lord Aimery spurred past a dazed John and, leaning down from his saddle, swung his sword in a blow strong enough to nearly decapitate the would-be murderer.

As the man collapsed in a spume of his own blood, Lord Aimery turned his horse again, shouting to his still-dazed squire: "Mount!"

John turned, grabbed the near stirrup, and pulled himself up into the saddle. Lord Aimery spurred toward the exit to the stable yard with his destrier on the lead. Centurion leapt forward without awaiting any human instructions, and the packhorse followed out of habit. Barry brought up the rear at a lope, his tail in the air and his ears up, as if he were enjoying himself for the first time since he'd acquired a new master.

Lord Aimery didn't stop until they were at least two miles beyond the limits of the town. This far they'd followed a paved road by the light of the waning moon, but the sound of water tumbling over itself and rushing under a low bridge reminded them of how thirsty they were. Aimery pulled up and, after checking one last time that they weren't being followed, he gave his palfrey a long rein. At once the horse plunged off the road and found his way to the soggy banks to drop his head into the water, the destrier beside him.

While the horses and Barry drank gratefully, Aimery turned to John, his face white in the night, to ask anxiously, "Are you all right?"

John nodded, but at once started to relive in his mind how close he had come to being stabbed. "My hauberk saved me," John said out loud.

Aimery snorted, and with a nod toward Barry loudly lapping up water beside the horses, retorted, "I'd say Barry saved you! He's earned *his* keep, if ever a dog did." Aimery was as badly shaken as John. They had come within a whisker of being cut down by common thieves in a seedy tavern. Aimery no longer had any doubt that John had overheard a genuine plot to murder them—and had he not, they might have had their throats slit while they slept. As it was, for those few seconds when the murderer held John between them, Aimery had believed John was a dead man. How would he ever have explained his

death to Ibelin?

Aimery had given his word that he would look after the boy—and here, on their very first night on Cyprus, he had nearly lost him. Ibelin would never have forgiven him, never.

John decided to dismount so he could give Barry some well-deserved thanks—only to discover his legs were shaking. When he landed on the uneven surface of the riverbank, they just gave way, and he fell and slipped in the mud.

Aimery at once jumped down to help him back onto his feet.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" John insisted, ashamed to have his lord discover he was trembling.

Aimery, however, already had him under the arm, and after he pulled John to his feet, he put an arm around his squire's shoulder to steady them both. "We both had a bad fright back there," he assured his squire. "It's a good thing you can understand Greek, or we'd both be dead. Let's see if we can find a dry place to catch some sleep."

John nodded his head vigorously.

Aimery let go of him and started searching under the bridge for a dry spot to roll out their blankets. Meanwhile, John went in search of Barry. The dog had stopped drinking and was looking over at him with lifted ears. As soon as John patted his thigh, he bounded over to have his ears scratched as John praised him profusely. "Good boy!" he told him. "Well done! You get the next sausage I can find."

"Offload the packhorse and bring our kit over here!" Aimery ordered, and John turned to his duties.

After they untacked and hobbled the horses, they settled down under the bridge. The ground was damp and uneven, and John tossed and turned before he could find a halfway comfortable position.

"At least it doesn't stink," Aimery commented as John adjusted himself yet again.

"No," John admitted. "And look? Isn't that Gemini?" He was looking out from under the bridge to the crystal-clear sky beyond. The moon was down and the stars were more brilliant than ever. The Milky Way was a smear of white, while the outlying stars were so vivid they seemed to prick like needles.

"What?" Aimery asked, confused.

John flung out his arm. "That pair of bright stars there! They're the constellation Gemini—they represent the twins Castor and Pollux, Helen of Troy's brothers."

Aimery snorted. His education in Poitou hadn't included the constellations of the Greeks, much less their mythology. The evidence

of his squire's education reminded him again of the boy's parents. "John," he started hesitantly.

"My lord?" John was young and resilient. The trembling had ceased and his breathing was steady. He was enjoying his adventure again.

"There's no need to tell your father about what happened tonight."

John cracked a smile at his lord. "There's no way I can; he's a hundred miles away."

"Yes, true—but frankly, we didn't exactly cover ourselves with glory tonight, and sometimes it's better fathers don't know all the scrapes their sons get into."

"If you don't want me to say anything to my father, then I won't," John agreed.

Aimery sighed with relief, remarking as casually as possible, "Good. Then let's get some sleep and hope we can find better lodgings tomorrow night."

** The place names used throughout the book are the currently familiar names instead of the historical names used in the period. The point is to tell the reader the location of action, not demonstrate the quality of my research by using contemporary designations that mean nothing to anyone but scholars.

Chapter Four
The Ineffective Despot

Nicosia, Cyprus
April 1193

BLOOD. GUY DE LUSIGNAN STARED IN horror at the stream of urine the color of Cypriot rosé wine, and his stomach cramped in fear. He didn't need to pay a physician a pretty price to know that blood in his urine was not a good sign. This, combined with the pains in his groin and intestines, warned him that he was ill. Seriously ill. If only Sibylla were alive. She would have comforted him, but there was no one to turn to anymore. No one he trusted. They all wanted him dead. Because of Hattin, which wasn't his fault.

The stream of urine had tapered off to a drip, and Guy closed his braies and tucked the tails of his shirt back inside before tightening the drawstring and letting his surcoat fall back in place. He stopped at the basin just outside the garderobe and poured water over his hands. He used a bar of balsam-scented soap to wash them more vigorously than usual, as if by washing his hands he could cleanse away the undefined illness that was eating away at his innards.

His squire, the awkward and bumbling Dick de Camville, was hovering uncertainly at the door to the outer chamber, moving nervously from foot to foot. It still galled Guy that none of his former barons had been willing to put their sons in his service. That they had elected Conrad de Montferrat and then Henri de Champagne King of Jerusalem in his place *might* have been rationalized on legal and political grounds, but refusing to let their sons serve him was a personal insult. Guy therefore found himself dependent on this semi-moron, the younger son by a second marriage of one of the men Richard of England had left on Cyprus more than two years ago. While the boy was willing enough, he was not the brightest youth Guy had encountered, and he stuttered half the time.

"What is it now?" Guy snapped at him, feeling exposed just because the boy had been so nearby while he urinated blood.

"Th-th-there's a man here, w-w-who says he is your b-b-brother," the squire stammered out, getting bright red from agitation in the process.

"My brother? Is Geoffrey back?" Guy asked hopefully. After Sibylla's death, Geoffrey had been the only soul to wholeheartedly support Guy. He had badgered the English King into recognizing Guy as the rightful King of Jerusalem, and had been furious when Richard

abruptly abandoned the Lusignans and accepted Conrad de Montferrat instead. After Montferrat was murdered and Henri de Champagne married Isabella, even Geoffrey conceded defeat. Champagne was the Plantagenet's nephew, and blood is thicker than water. Still, Geoffrey had seemed willing to accept Cyprus as an alternative to Jerusalem—until he got here. From the start, he hadn't liked Cyprus. No sooner had the spring sailing season opened than he abandoned Guy. That left Guy utterly alone in this hostile world of treacherous Greeks and greedy Italians.

"N-n-no. Another b-b-brother," the squire squeaked into Guy's thoughts.

It could hardly be his eldest brother, Hugh "le Brun," Guy calculated; he'd returned to his lordship in Poitou even before King Richard departed. That left only the third of the four Lusignan brothers. "Aimery?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes, it can hardly come as *that* much of a surprise," Aimery answered from behind him. Guy spun about as his brother stepped into the room from the balcony.

Guy gaped at his elder brother, completely confused by his own emotions. It *was* good to see a familiar face, a face that had shadowed him for so much of his thirteen years here in Outremer. But the voice still had that condescending ring to it, and Aimery's eyes betrayed his continued disdain for his "little brother." Aimery had never accepted that his "little brother" had been more successful than he, had risen higher, was a king . . .

"What brings you here?" Guy asked warily.

"Well, it seems that—because of you—Henri de Champagne does not trust *me* anymore, and since he does not trust me, he wanted me removed as Constable. Since I can't draw on the Constable's income anymore, I'm penniless—all because of you. Under the circumstances, the good Baron d'Ibelin thought I might find more lucrative alternatives here on Cyprus."

"The *good* Baron d'Ibelin," Guy sneered sarcastically, "who *never* supported me, who undermined me at every turn, who worked *against* me—" Before he got more insulting, his elder brother gestured with his head to the youth in the doorway to the balcony, and Guy belatedly recognized Ibelin's eldest son. Instantly, his resentment boiled. The barons refused to let their sons serve him, but Ibelin—the ringleader of the lot!—allowed his *eldest* son and *heir* to serve Aimery! It was ridiculous.

His anger spilled over into his voice as he snapped back, "Well, if 'lucrative alternatives' is what you're looking for, you've come to the wrong place! The Greeks and Italians between them have stolen

everything of value. Nobody pays me a penny in taxes, customs, or fees, and if I ride so much as five miles outside of Nicosia I have to fear for my life. Indeed, I'm hardly safe in Nicosia, either. I never know when or where an assassin might be lurking with a poisoned knife, ready to send me the same way as that bastard Conrad de Montferrat!"

The tirade was out before Guy had a chance to consider what he was saying—but that was typical Guy, Aimery reflected. He had always been one to speak before he thought. What surprised him was rather how haggard Guy looked. Guy was very vain. He had always loved the way he looked, and consequently had given his appearance the utmost attention. He was, to be sure, still dressed like the king he no longer was, but his hair was thinning and receding from his forehead. The skin on his face was sagging noticeably, too, and his eyes were sunk in wrinkled sockets darkened by shadows. He looked considerably older than his forty-three years, older and less well (or so Aimery thought) than Aimery himself.

"And you are doing nothing about the situation?" Aimery asked calmly, sinking down on the arm of a heavy wooden chair and swinging his free leg.

"Of course I'm doing something about it!" Guy shouted at his brother, all his anger and fear erupting into this outburst. It was actually a relief to be able to shout at someone; Guy had been ashamed to shout like this at his servants, his soldiers, or the few men who had followed him here. Yet trying to disguise his fear had exhausted him. To his brother he explained, "I've sent Sirs Galganus de Cheneché and Henri de Brie to ravage all of Karpas as punishment for their effrontery! If the people refuse to pay their lawful taxes, Galganus and Henri take their valuables and burn their miserable houses so they learn a lesson. They've especially made an example of the monasteries. I hate the way these pompous Greek monks pretend to be poor! Ha! If the example of Karpas doesn't work on its own, I'll send Barlais to Kyrenia and Bethsan to Paphos next! I'm not going to tolerate people lying and cheating to me!"

Only gradually did Guy realize that he was ranting and raving while his brother and the two squires just stared at him as if he were mad. He fell silent. "What is it?" he asked nervously, looking from his brother to his brother's astonished squire and then over at Camville, who hastily looked down. Before anyone could answer, Guy felt the urgent need to urinate and dashed back toward the garderobe.

Aimery looked over at John with an expression pregnant with discussion for later on. Then he glanced at his brother's squire and asked, "What's your name, boy?"

“Dick, my lord, Dick de Camville, after my father—and the King.” He obviously meant the English King, since there was no King Richard in Outremer and never had been.

Aimery nodded, then asked in a low voice with a jerk of his head in the direction of the garderobe, “Is he like this often?”

“I-I-I don’t know what you mean, my lord. Isn’t this the way he always is?”

Aimery drew a deep breath and rubbed his forehead in uncertainty. Then he drew himself to his feet and declared, “We’re going to take lodgings in the khan across the street. When my brother is more disposed, he can send for us.” Beckoning John, he briskly left his brother’s chamber before the latter re-emerged from the garderobe.

As they descended the stairs to the street, he remarked in a low voice to John: “Well, at least he didn’t order us to leave the island.”

The stone caravansary (known locally as a khan) that sat opposite the royal palace in Nicosia was one of the largest and nicest Aimery had ever seen. It had evidently been built in the reign of Isaac Comnenus to cater to clients attending the court. It had a large courtyard with a central cistern surrounded by washbasins, and two large plane trees for shade. While the rooms on the ground floor behind the arcade encircling the courtyard were small and functional storerooms, the second floor offered spacious suites with access to the interior gallery and small balconies over the street. The floors were plaster and were obviously washed regularly by the cleaning staff, so that the entire complex made a pleasantly clean impression. The stables behind were equally spacious and well kept, and John had no qualms turning their horses over to the grooms, all of whom spoke passable Latin and went by Italian names. John rapidly surmised that the proprietor was Italian, and this was soon verified.

The man introduced himself as Carlo di Rossi of Pisa. He explained in Latin that he had settled on Cyprus after the expulsion of the Pisans from Constantinople in 1182. He had enjoyed the patronage of Isaac Comnenus’ guests, but proudly claimed to be one of the first citizens of Nicosia to do homage to Richard of England. He gave them a corner room, told them that his brother Mario ran “the best tavern on Cyprus” (just around the corner), and assured them that the Greek baths behind the khan were “first class and completely safe.”

Although Aimery and John had stopped on the outskirts of the city to clean themselves up after their night in the rough, they welcomed both a proper bath and a good meal. After a good hour in the baths steaming out the dirt and stiffness, they changed into clean clothes, leaving their dirty things with the khan’s efficient-looking laundry

mistress, and headed for the tavern, which was tucked in a side alley.

This establishment was small and quiet, with a notably high-class clientele composed of Italian-speaking merchants, guild masters, and marine officers. The proud prices, apparently, made it unattractive to the locals or sailors, and this in turn justified a greater investment in the furnishings. There were flagstone floors, tile paneling on the walls, glazed windows facing the street, and cushions on the wooden benches. The smells coming from the kitchen were nothing less than mouthwatering.

Mentioning Carlo's name as instructed, they were immediately shown to a small corner table, and Mario told them to leave everything to him. A moment later a very pretty young woman in a crisply clean apron and scarves covering her hair came out to lay down trenchers and cutlery and ask their wine preference.

Before she had finished, Mario came back to see that all was in order, and Aimery asked him to join them for some wine. "We have only just arrived and would be interested in hearing the latest news," he explained.

"I will join you shortly," Mario promised and disappeared back into the kitchens.

Their wine was brought and exceeded all expectations. John swore he hadn't had anything so good since leaving Ibelin, and Aimery agreed that the wine matched even the best from Poitou. "I told you Cyprus is rich in resources," Aimery insisted, feeling that so far John's introduction to the island had been less than felicitous.

"Yes, true," Mario intoned, coming up behind Aimery and asking with a gesture if he could sit. Aimery welcomed him. He had his own goblet and a glass carafe of wine with him, which he set on the table but did not immediately pour or drink. "So, you are newly come from Acre?" he asked, identifying them as natives of Outremer by their dress and shaved faces.

"Yes," Aimery agreed. "We arrived two days ago."

"And what brings you here, if I may ask?"

"I have a brother here," Aimery replied evasively, preferring not to reveal his identity.

"I see," Mario answered, but he glanced at the table next to them, at which four distinguished-looking gentlemen were engaged in an animated conversation in Italian. Catching his look, one of the gentlemen immediately got to his feet and came over to bow to Aimery. "My lord Constable," he started, shattering Aimery's illusions of anonymity, "you may not remember me, but I am Francesco Pasquali, bailli of Pisa here on Cyprus. May I join you?"

“I’m honored,” Aimery countered diplomatically, although inwardly annoyed at being recognized so readily and even more for being called “Constable;” it meant he would be forced to explain that he no longer held the title.

Mario surrendered his seat to the Pisan bailli and withdrew. The bailli poured the wine left behind by Mario and raised his glass to Aimery.

Aimery answered the gesture and they both drank without a formal toast. “My lord, let me assure you that your reputation precedes you,” the Pisan bailli opened as he set his glass down. “My brothers in Acre sent word of your courageous defense of their innocence.”

“Thank you,” Aimery answered stiffly; he had long since regretted his actions. Had he just kept his mouth shut, maybe he would still be Constable of Jerusalem, living with his wife and children. . . .

“My colleagues and I assure you that we have nothing to do with the attacks. They are completely unauthorized—but, I fear, a sign of the times. We live in very troubled times.” He shook his head.

“We do have a truce,” Aimery pointed out.

“A desert truce, my lord. The seas are still at war, and now this unnecessary violence on Cyprus.” He shook his head. “I know you are not a man of trade, but surely you understand just how devastating your brother’s policies are? Men of trade need peace and security above all else. Much as we hated the despot Isaac Comnenus, at least he maintained law and order on the island. The roads from one end of the island to the other were safe. We had no need to fear for the safety and honor of our wives and daughters when they ventured onto the streets. All that is gone!” He gestured dramatically with his hands.

“Why?” Aimery asked, leaning back against the wall and watching the Pisan carefully.

“Why? Because your brother’s ham-fisted attempts to assert his control have sparked widespread rebellion. Angry young men don’t ask if the people they attack are the same people who caused the problem. We’ve had four warehouses torched in the last three months! Several inland convoys have been shot at by archers hiding in the hills. Camels and horses have been killed or stolen. So far the ports are safe, but for how much longer, my lord? If things continue this way, we will have to cut our losses and relocate.”

Aimery considered that an empty threat. Where would the Pisan mercantile community relocate to? Like the other Italian merchants, the Pisans were in the Eastern Mediterranean because of the riches that could be made trading with Constantinople, the crusader states, and Alexandria. Nevertheless, Aimery recognized that the crusader

states needed the Italian merchant communities for their own economy—and for their fleets, which kept the Saracen ships bottled up in their harbors. He also recognized that trade was greatly inhibited and disrupted by unrest and violence. “And what do you expect me to do about it, good sir?”

“Convince your brother to call off his dogs! Brie and Cheneché are worse than rabid wolves!” Aimery glanced at his squire, and John squirmed uncomfortably. The Pisan continued, ignorant of the squire’s identity and the fact that Brie was his cousin. “They have set the entire Karpas peninsula aflame, and as people flee before their mercenary soldiers, they spread fear and hatred to the rest of the island. They must be stopped!”

“My brother claims he has not received the taxes owed him.”

“Well, there are better ways of collecting taxes than destroying the means to pay them!” the man of commerce informed the nobleman sharply. “How are people supposed to pay taxes without income? Without mills or workshops? He’s destroying his own tax base with his scorched-earth policy!”

The Pisan had worked himself up into a rage of righteous indignation, and one of his colleagues rose from the next table to pat him on the shoulder. “Calm yourself, Francesco. Take a sip of the wine.” Then turning to Aimery he added, “Forgive my dear friend Francesco for his little outburst, but believe me it is justified. The situation here is very dire, very dire indeed. We all hope you will be able to talk sense to your brother Lord Guy.”

Aimery smiled cynically. He might talk “sense” to Guy until he was blue in the face, but his brother rarely listened. . . .

Just as Aimery had anticipated, Guy was not receptive to advice—at least not from his older brother. Gathered in the council chamber on the far side of the heavy wooden door were nearly all the men who had thrown in their lot with Guy de Lusignan and come with him to Cyprus. They were only a handful of knights—no barons among them—and most had been made paupers by Saladin’s invasion of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The exceptions were the two Englishmen left on Cyprus by King Richard—Robert of Thornton and Richard of Camville—along with Reynald Barlais, a Poitevin sergeant-at-arms who had been in the service of the Lusignan family for decades. He’d come out to the Holy Land with Geoffrey, but had elected to remain on Cyprus with Guy.

From what John could hear through the door, the Englishmen, both older men left on the island by King Richard for their administrative and financial talents rather than the strength of their arms, were the only two men in the other room backing Aimery's calls for de-escalation and peace overtures to the rebels. Barlais—strongly backed by John's cousin Henri de Brie, Walter de Bethsan, and Galganus de Cheneché—was furiously and loudly insisting that the rebels had to be "crushed," "obliterated," or "exterminated."

"At what cost?" Thornton asked in an exasperated tone. "You're destroying the economic base of the entire island!"

"Better that than let these snakes get away with biting us! If we don't crush them now, they'll attack us again and again!" John's cousin Henri snarled.

Henri de Brie was the son of Balian's half-sister Ermengard. As a very young knight, he had taken service with Reynald de Châtillon, the Baron of Oultrejourdain. It was with was Châtillon that he had won infamy by commanding one of the galleys Reynald de Châtillon launched in the Red Sea in 1182. Châtillon's fleet had wreaked havoc with the Muslim pilgrimages and spread panic across the Arabian Peninsula. Brie was practically the only survivor of the raids, and he'd been rewarded by Oultrejourdain with an heiress. After Oultrejourdain's death, he'd attached himself to Guy de Lusignan.

"These 'snakes,' as you call them, are Christian men and women," Camville reminded Brie. "Men and women who for the most part assisted King Richard to capture this island in the first place!"

"Well, Christian or not, they are defying us!" Henri de Brie replied forcefully, adding in a more conciliatory tone, "I've got a suggestion: Give each of us defined territory and let us deal with the situation therein as we see fit. We'll soon see whose methods work best!" He flung out the words as a challenge.

"You're just angling for a barony!" Guy objected petulantly, leaving John nodding in agreement. It had always galled his cousin that despite his close ties to the Ibelin family, the Bries were rear-tenants rather than barons.

A loud bang from the opposite side of the room made John start and turn sharply. A man had just entered the anteroom, and it had been the door banging against a chest as it was flung open that had startled John. He was even more stunned when he recognized the man standing in the doorway: it was his former brother-in-law, Isabella's first husband, Humphrey de Toron.

Toron drew up sharply and stared. "John?" he asked uncertainly. Humphrey hadn't seen John d'Ibelin in nearly four years—not since the day he'd left Tyre with his then-wife Isabella to take part in the

siege of Acre. Toron blamed John's parents for the annulment of his marriage some fifteen months later, and had refused to set foot in the same city, let alone the same building, they occupied ever since. In the intervening years, however, John had grown from boy to youth. Indeed, it was more his increasing resemblance to his father than to his former boyhood self that allowed Humphrey to recognize him.

"Yes, my lord," John answered, feeling acutely uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here? Your father isn't—" Humphrey immediately looked toward the closed door, registering the raised and angry voices on the other side.

"No, no," John hastened to reassure him. "I'm squire to Lord Aimery, and he came to join his brother."

Humphrey relaxed visibly, and he glanced back at John. John had been his brother-in-law for seven years, and lacking brothers of his own, he'd looked on John as a younger brother. He'd enjoyed reading from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to a wide-eyed John, and John had been one of the first to hear Ernoul's songs. The thought of Ernoul wrenched at Humphrey's heart.

Ibelin's squire Ernoul had been the only other living soul, besides Isabella, who admired Humphrey's learning and gift for languages. For years Humphrey and Ernoul had exchanged manuscripts and recited poetry to one another. When the Dowager Queen and Ibelin tore Isabella away from him so they could use her as a pawn in their dynastic game to make Conrad de Montferrat king, they had taken from him not only the woman he loved, but his best friend as well. "How is Ernoul?" Humphrey heard himself asking. His own emotions —hatred and grief mixed together—made his voice sound faint and far away.

"Ernoul's just become a father," John answered quickly, relieved that Humphrey had asked about his father's squire rather than Isabella herself. He knew he would not be able to lie convincingly about how happy Isabella was with Champagne, and he knew just as certainly that that was *not* what Humphrey wanted to hear.

Humphrey's face twitched. He'd forgotten Ernoul was now wed. Humphrey had been held in Saracen captivity longer than the other Christian barons and not released until May of 1189. By the time he reached Tyre to be reunited with Isabella at last, he had been bewildered to discover that his friend Ernoul was married. Not just married, but in love with his wife as well. Although welcoming, Ernoul had been more interested in practicing his next duet with Alys than in spending time with his old friend. In retrospect, Humphrey had fled Tyre to avoid the disappointment of Ernoul's coolness as much as to escape Ibelin's contempt. "Send Ernoul my

congratulations," Humphrey replied stiffly. "Was it a son or a daughter?"

"A daughter; they've named her Helen—for Helen of Troy," John offered, apparently remembering those nights reading the works of Homer just as Humphrey did.

Humphrey nodded sadly, as the door from the inner chamber opened abruptly and young Gauvain de Cheneché burst out with a frown on his face. "John! You've got no business jawboning with Toron! We need refreshments! Wine and water and something to eat, too! Hurry!"

"I don't take orders from you, Gauvain!" John bristled. "I'll—"

"*Sir* Gauvain, to you!" the younger Cheneché snarled, cuffing John for good measure. "Now get moving before I teach you your manners!"

"Manners you obviously never learned yourself!" Toron admonished, grabbing the younger Cheneché by the arm and pulling him back. "Do you think raping little girls gives you the right to treat other men the same way the infamous Châtillon did?"

"Well, at least I'm known for raping girls, not bending my ass for other men!" Cheneché shot back.

Toron blanched and John gasped.

"What? Didn't you know?" Cheneché sneered in John's direction. "Why do you think your sister dumped Toron at the first opportunity? She wanted a real man in her bed, not a sodomite!"

"We sent you for refreshments, Gauvain—not to stand about insulting the only baron on the island!" The growl came from the older Cheneché, and at once both Sir Gauvain and John fled in the direction of the kitchens, leaving Humphrey to face the other men alone.

Stiffly, Humphrey walked into the council chamber overheated by the tempers simmering in the men around him. He wished he could convince himself that they hadn't all heard what young Sir Gauvain had just said, but in his heart he knew that, whether they'd heard the remark or not, they agreed with it.

And then his eyes met those of Guy de Lusignan, and he saw profound and unexpected sympathy in the former king's eyes. Guy, too, had lost the woman he'd loved, and he'd lost the respect of his vassals and his men. Guy de Lusignan knew what it was like to be scorned and despised by one's peers.

"It's good to see you," Guy greeted Toron verbally, indicating a vacant chair. Guy would never forget that it was Toron's defection from the High Court to do homage to Sibylla after she'd been crowned

without their consent that had prevented the Count of Tripoli and Ibelin from crowning Isabella as a rival queen. It would have come to civil war in 1186 if it hadn't been for young Toron. Without Toron's "betrayal" of his wife and father-in-law, Guy knew he might never have been king at all. Guy remembered that, and it was more important to him than whether Humphrey preferred boys to girls. "I need your loyal counsel," he told Toron with a tired, but sincere, smile.

Toron smiled back, weary but thankful, and took his place at the table. Ibelin had never forgiven him for betraying the barons in 1186. He even blamed Humphrey for the catastrophe of Hattin, arguing that if Humphrey hadn't "gone crawling on his belly" to Sibylla and Guy, the barons could have prevented Guy from becoming king. And, so Ibelin's reasoning went, if Guy had not been king, he would not have led the feudal army to defeat. Another king, Ibelin contended, would have listened to his advisers; another king would not have fallen into Saladin's trap; another king would not have lost the battle and so would not have lost the Kingdom. . . .

Humphrey and Guy were both burdened with the guilt for that catastrophe, Humphrey reflected, like two oxen yoked to a plow. They strained together to move forward, but the plow caught in the earth, held back by the bloody mud of a defeat no one could—or should—ever forgive.

Chapter Five
Of Beggars and Kings

Nicosia, Cyprus
October 1193

SIX MONTHS ON THE ISLAND HAD dramatically improved John's command of Greek. A lifetime of classroom lessons, so long stored away in his brain like dusty volumes in a forgotten trunk, had been unlocked by the sounds around him. Growing understanding had slowly been transformed from hesitant into more fluent speech. With the confidence that he could understand what was happening around him (and ask his way if necessary) had also come increasing curiosity about his new world.

When John realized that just by changing into a different set of clothes he could also blend in with the native population, he had started exploring Nicosia from the ground up—enjoying the utter freedom of anonymity. When John slipped out of the khan in his Greek clothes, he left John d'Ibelin behind, and with him the burden of being the son of the savior of Jerusalem and a paragon of chivalry.

Not that John transformed himself into something despicable or dishonorable. John had not grown into a taste for loose women and had no natural proclivity to alcoholism. Because he was alone on his adventures, he was also not in a position to be led astray. His only companion was Barry, who clung to him as loyally as a shadow, ever ready to share a meal—or an adventure.

Today John was looking for firewood. The nights were chilly, and as the frequency of the rain showers increased, the air turned damp as well. The khan provided each resident with an allotment of wood, but it was far too little, in Lord Aimery's opinion. John wanted to surprise him with a big stack of wood to get them through the next few days. Having no illusions about how much wood he could personally carry, he borrowed a donkey and panniers from the khan and headed toward the outskirts of town where the potters had their kilns. Kilns consume an enormous amount of firewood, and John reckoned he would either encounter one of the suppliers or be able to purchase directly from the kiln enough wood for their modest needs.

Unfortunately, the potters occupied land northeast of Nicosia, so it was a bit of a hike, and John opted to cut through the cattle market and past the slaughterhouse beyond. It was a good place to find a bone or two for Barry, although he disliked the number of beggars that prowled around on the lookout for edible refuse. As always, the beggars clustered near the stinking bins behind the abattoir, and stray dogs licked the blood seeping out of them. Barry lifted his ears and wagged his tail in anticipation, but John braced himself for the smell and tried to hold his breath as he scanned the fresh heaps of bones for the best pieces. He rapidly chose one, handed it off to Barry, and then took a second for later, stashing it into a sack he had over his shoulder. Then he turned away and put a dozen steps' distance between himself and the bins before letting out his breath.

He found his path was blocked by a young beggar with a bad bruise on the side of his face. John had seen him here several times over the last couple of months, but without the bruise. Evidently he'd run into some kind of trouble. Although he was smaller than John, John guessed they were about the same age. Unlike the younger children, who worked as a pack and had to surrender all their earnings to the adults, this youth usually worked alone.

"I've made a collar for the dog," the beggar announced, holding out a collar made of woven straw with a crude buckle carved from bone. "You can have it for just five obols," he told John.

John looked down at Barry. The faithful dog did not need a collar; he followed John everywhere without it. On the other hand, John's mother had taught him that it was better to reward industry than sloth. She always made a point of offering alms to the working poor, or institutions that cared for those not yet or no longer able to work, rather than beggars. She had warned him never to give to children who begged because, she claimed, they only grew up thinking everyone else owed them their livelihood and became thieves and pickpockets. This boy, however, was clearly trying to earn his keep.

Seeing his hesitation, the boy pulled another object out of his pocket. "Or what about a comb?" he asked, offering a comb likewise carved from cattle bone. "It will cost you ten obols."

"That's too much," John protested. The money his father had given him was long since used up (except for the cost of the passage home, still sewn in his boot), and he had to make do with the allowance that Lord Aimery gave him. "Besides," he added, "I have to get firewood, and I don't know how much it will cost. Maybe another day."

"I'll help you with the firewood," the boy offered. "I know a place you can get it cheap."

"I was going to the potters," John explained.

“They’ll charge you double,” the beggar dismissed the idea. “I know a man who resells wood from damaged structures. There is always some waste he doesn’t care about.”

John weighed whether or not to trust the youth, and decided to go ahead. After all, he had Barry with him and his dagger. “OK.”

The beggar smiled, stuffed the collar and comb back in his pockets, and indicated the way. John fell in beside him with the donkey and Barry trailing. “What’s your name?” he asked the beggar.

“Lakis. And yours?”

“Janis. How did you get that bruise?”

“That bastard Niki tried to take my earnings from me,” Lakis told him bitterly.

“Did he succeed?”

“Sort of. I had some coins hidden.”

“Why do you hang around the slaughterhouse? I’ll bet you could get work somewhere in the city,” John suggested, trying to implement his mother’s policy of encouraging work.

“Where?” Lakis asked back hopefully.

John was embarrassed to have to shrug and admit he didn’t know. “Didn’t you learn a trade?” he asked instead.

“My Dad was a miller,” Lakis declared, his lip a grim line, and he refused to meet John’s eye.

John understood the use of the past tense, and concluded that something terrible had happened to Lakis’ father. After a few minutes of trudging along in silence, John decided to reopen the conversation by asking, “May I see the collar again?”

Lakis brightened up at once, and pulled it out of his pocket. John examined it carefully. The straw collar was only crudely woven, uneven, and not very strong, but the buckle was cleverly made. “You’re good with carving,” John told Lakis. “Where did you learn?”

“After I went to live with my uncle (he’s a butcher in Karpasia), I met this man, a refugee from Jerusalem, who used to collect the bones from behind the butchery so he could carve them into things for sale. He taught me how to make things, but my aunt hated him. She always chased him away whenever she saw him and forbade me from visiting him. She said he was evil, a Musselman.”

“Had he been a slave?” John asked, suspecting this was one of the released captives trying to start his life over again but tainted by six years in Saracen slavery.

“Yes,” Lakis admitted. “He’d learned to carve from the Saracens, only they had ivory rather than bone, he said. He spoke Arabic, but he

assured me he was a good Christian." Lakis sounded uncertain.

"Of course he was," John defended the unknown man. "Many of our —" John had just been about to say "vassals," only to realize that would betray that he wasn't the Greek servant boy he pretended to be.

"What?" Lakis asked.

"Nothing. What happened? I mean, did you disobey your aunt and see the man anyway?"

"Yes, until she caught me and had my uncle beat me. It was terrible, and I hated it there, anyway. I don't want to be a butcher, and my cousins will inherit anyway, so what's the point?"

"You should apprentice to a carver—someone who makes book covers or the like," John decided enthusiastically, thinking of the magnificent carved ivory cover of one of his mother's books.

"Book covers?" Lakis asked in a skeptical tone.

John suspected he'd given himself away again. "Or combs or whatever," he added with a dismissive gesture.

"What's your trade?" Lakis countered.

"Me?" John shrugged. "I'm just a servant. How far is it to this place with the firewood?"

Lakis returned his attention to their goal and led them to a noisy workshop in a back alley, squeezed in behind an iron-worker's forge and a candlestick maker. In the courtyard, wood had been heaped up in a messy pile. Most of it was charred in places. Much of it was broken and splintered. Large, twisted nails reached out of the beams in awkward places, ready to tear open a man's hand. Behind the pile of wood were some workbenches and vises where a couple of young men sawed away damaged portions of the wood to rescue the still-sound portions. The good wood was stacked along the far wall by length, while the rubbish landed in a second, smaller heap. Lakis pointed to the latter, and John nodded. Partially charred wood made excellent kindling. "Do you know the proprietor?" John asked Lakis. "Can you ask him what he wants for the wood?"

Lakis nodded, adding, "Go around the corner. If he sees you with the donkey, he'll charge you more."

John dutifully removed himself and waited until Lakis returned with an armload of wood. He dumped it on the street and went to get more while John loaded the wood into the panniers on the donkey. After Lakis had made five trips, they had all they could load on the donkey, and John asked how much he owed. "Ten obols," Lakis declared, holding out his hand.

John suspected the wood was free and that Lakis was simply taking

what he'd refused to pay for the comb, but he didn't mind. He wanted the firewood, not the comb. Having paid Lakis, he turned the donkey around to start back across town to the khan.

"Where do you live?" Lakis asked.

"Other side of town," John answered vaguely.

"The nice side of town," Lakis observed.

John shrugged, and they continued in silence for a few more minutes.

"Are you sure you don't want the collar?" Lakis asked a little plaintively. "It's only five obols."

"Maybe another day," John demurred, and they parted.

After that, John saw Lakis at various places. He diligently tried to peddle his bone objects—combs, hairpins, buttons, and the like—at the daily markets. He also made a couple of crosses that he tried to sell on the steps of St. Sophia. John always greeted him and they would exchange a nod and a smile, but it wasn't until the lion tamer came to town that they spoke again.

The lion tamer had taught two aging lions tricks, and he gave a performance every night on the field where the monthly horse market was held. It cost two obols to get in and was immensely popular; even King Guy went with his brother and household knights. John, however, had been stuck looking after the horses and Barry, who had made a frightful fuss, barking incessantly. So the next day he asked Lord Aimery's permission to go back on his own. While Lord Aimery agreed in principle, they first had to make a trip to Paphos for King Guy, and by the time they returned to Nicosia, the show had been in town almost a week and the crowds were thinning. John spotted Lakis and waved to him.

Lakis made his way around to John, and they stood at the railing side by side as if they were old friends.

"Have you ever seen lions before, Janis?" Lakis asked as they waited.

John shook his head. "My father said that when he was young there used to be wild lions around, and the old king hunted them sometimes."

"The old king?" Lakis asked puzzled. "You mean Isaac Comnenus?"

John bit his lip; he'd slipped up again. "Yes," he said to cover his blunder.

To his surprise, Lakis seemed to believe him. He looked back at the improvised arena and nodded. "The brothers of Antiphonitis say there are still lions up in Trodos. The Romans used to capture them from

here for their games in Rome."

"Really?" John asked, astonished.

Lakis looked over his shoulder at his companion with a frown of concentration, "Where are you from, Janis?"

"Here," John insisted. "Nicosia."

The look that Lakis gave him was full of doubt, but he was rescued by the arrival of the aging and less-than-impressive lions.

After the show was over, John, being famished as usual, suggested they get a pocket of flatbread stuffed with fatty lamb sold by a street vendor. Lakis shook his head vigorously, and John surmised he wasn't making much money with his street sales, so he said (somewhat grandiosely), "Oh, this one's on me," and pulled out his purse.

Lakis' eyes widened a little at the sight of the comfortably bulky purse, but he didn't say no. By the way he devoured the meal, John concluded that Lakis was a lot hungrier than he was himself. As Lakis finished his meal with a sigh of satisfaction, John took advantage of their now stronger friendship to ask, "What happened to your father, Lakis?"

"He's dead," Lakis answered, his face closing.

Lakis nodded grimly. "And your mother too? Was it an accident?" John asked, sensing that there was some terrible story behind Lakis' condition. The son of a miller and nephew of a butcher wasn't a street urchin by birth.

"No, they killed them," Lakis croaked out, that grim expression returning to his face.

"Who?" John asked innocently.

"The Franks, of course! Who else? Lusignan's Wolves! Brie!" Lakis lashed out, and John felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. "Don't you realize what is happening here?" Lakis asked in disbelief. "Where do you think all those charred beams came from? They're the broken bits of burned-down houses and mills!"

"They burned your father's mill?" John asked in horror.

"With my parents and sisters still inside!" Lakis screamed it out because it had been pent up inside him for too long. Then he turned and ran away into the afternoon crowd. John tried to follow, but Lakis was lost to him.

John went over in his mind all the things they'd heard from the Pisans and men-at-arms and, indeed, from King Guy himself. John didn't doubt that what Lakis said was true. His problem was not understanding how his own cousin could be responsible—and not knowing what he could or should do to make it up to Lakis. How do

you compensate a youth for his parents? His sisters? His inheritance? His future? Lakis wasn't like Barry. He couldn't just be adopted, could he? John looked down at Barry, and hugged him firmly in a gesture really meant for Lakis.

As he helped Lord Aimery out of his clothes that night and prepared to brush them out and fold them for the next day, John kept stopping, completely distracted by his thoughts.

"Just spit it out, John! What's troubling you?"

John looked up at his lord with a sigh of relief to have been given an invitation. "My lord, I met a boy my own age at the lion show today, and—and," it spilled out in a rush, "he said his parents had both been burned alive in their own mill by my cousin Henri."

Aimery started, then shook his head. "He was just trying to get alms from you."

"No, he wasn't. He doesn't know who I am. He thinks I'm a Greek servant named Janis."

"Ah, is that what you do in your spare time? Lurk around taverns in disguise?"

"I don't lurk!" John protested. "And I told you, I was at the lion show, not in a tavern. Besides, all that matters is whether it's true or not. Did my cousin burn down mills with innocent people—women and girls—still inside?"

Aimery took a deep breath. "That's what people are saying. I don't know for sure—but if you must know, I think it's probable. Your cousin was one of the leaders of the Red Sea raids, remember?"

"Then they have every reason to hate us, don't they?" John countered angrily. "It's not just about taxes and revenues, is it? It's about making boys orphans—and beggars."

"I'm sorry if I'm the first to tell you this, but life isn't pretty and it isn't fair!" Aimery snapped back. It was bad enough that his brother was an idiot, without his squire rubbing his nose in it!

"You think I don't know that, my lord?" John shot back, his jaw set stubbornly, and the boy's stance reminded Aimery so sharply of his father-in-law, he almost laughed. Meanwhile, John was continuing, "I've lost my inheritance, too, remember?" But even as he protested, he was reminded that while he'd lost his wealth, he hadn't lost his parents or siblings, and at once his stance of defiance crumbled.

He felt a heavy hand fall on his shoulder, and Lord Aimery spoke more gently now. "Don't blame yourself, John. There is nothing you can do."

John didn't like that answer. He *wanted* to do something. He

frowned and looked down in frustration and shame.

"John, I know it's hard being separated from your brother and cousins. You need to spend more time with boys your own age. Why don't you try to befriend the Camville boy? He was asking about you only this morning. I'm sure he needs a friend, too, and you're both from the same class, the same church."

"Can you hold Barry's front paws while I remove the burrs from his belly?" John asked Dick de Camville. It was worded as a request, but it was really an offer of friendship, and Dick jumped at it. He loved John's big, furry dog and wished he was allowed to have a dog of his own.

"W-w-where did you get B-b-barry?" he asked the other squire, as he took Barry's paws in his hands and held him upright while John took a comb to his belly to vigorously remove a collection of burrs.

"He was a stray," John answered without looking up or stopping in his task. "Or, well, he belonged to a leper, who died. I adopted him."

"And your f-f-father let you?" Dick asked in wonder.

"I'd already left home and was with Lord Aimery. My father wouldn't have minded, though. The problem was always my mother. She said our house in Tyre was too small for dogs—but then she let my little sister Meg have one!" John added in disgust.

"Is it true your mother is a Greek princess?" Dick's stutter was subsiding as he became more comfortable with John.

"Yes," John confirmed without looking up from his task.

"And you speak Greek?"

"Yes, pretty well now."

"Do—do you think you could help me?"

"How?" John asked without looking up; Barry had started to fuss and squirm, and he had to concentrate on his task.

"My lord wants to consult an apothecary—a Greek apothecary. He says the Italian apothecaries are all quacks."

That got John's attention and he looked up at Dick, fully conscious of how significant this was.

Misinterpreting his stare, Dick shrugged. Barry yapped in protest, so Dick let go of his paws and patted him on the back of his head to calm him. As if talking to the dog, he added, "I think he's afraid the communes will find out he's sick if he goes to an Italian apothecary."

“Yes, I imagine he does,” John admitted. “What’s the problem?”

Dick shrugged and stammered out, “I d-d-don’t know.” His stammer betrayed that he was lying, but John decided not to push for an answer. They were only just becoming friends, after all.

“You want me to find a Greek apothecary and bring him to Lord Guy?” John asked instead.

“Yes, but only after d-d-dark and in secret! No one must f-f-find out. Not even L-l-lord Aimery.”

“You can’t ask me to keep secrets from Lord Aimery,” John protested.

“Then f-f-forget I said anything!” Dick retorted hotly, his face flushed. He stopped petting Barry and turned to leave.

“Wait! Stop!” John understood their budding friendship was on the line.

Dick stopped and looked back over his shoulder, waiting.

“I promise to keep it a secret.”

“You’ll do it, then?” Dick asked.

John nodded again.

Andreas Katzouroubis was a cautious man. He had survived the many vicissitudes of recent years largely by minding his own business, which was healing the sick. So long as the island had been part of the Eastern Roman Empire, he had done his duty in the large municipal hospital in Nicosia. In accordance with the custom throughout the Empire, he had tended patients there every other month for nominal payment, and had earned his living in the other six months by tending private patients. That system broke down, however, when the despot Isaac Comnenus took it into his head that the Head Doctor was poisoning him and had the man tortured to death. After that, no one wanted the job of “Head Doctor,” and soon no one was being paid. So they stopped going to work in the hospital and withdrew to private practice, treating penniless patients on a charitable basis at their own discretion.

Financially this had not proven such a bad development, but Andreas Katzouroubis had not joined the medical profession for the sake of income alone. For one thing, he was genuinely interested in healing the sick, or at least easing their suffering—but the driving passion behind his choice of profession had really been fascination with the human body and how it worked. He loved the study of

medicine more than the practice of it, and to this end he had studied both in Constantinople and in Alexandria. He had also spent one year as a "guest physician" in the famous Al-'Adudi Hospital in Baghdad, and another at the renowned Hospitaller establishment in Jerusalem. Andreas Katzouroubis was a man of the world as well as a highly respected pharmacist.

The request from a Greek-speaking squire to come attend on the hated Latin despot Guy de Lusignan did not fill him with particular enthusiasm. He saw no particular reason why he should either heal or help this man who had unleashed so much misery on his beloved homeland. Nor did he believe the man could be suffering from an ailment that would interest him intellectually. The pay might, admittedly, be good—or it might be death, as in the case of the Head Doctor. Dealing with despots was always a dubious proposition.

On the other hand, it was usually not wise to refuse a summons from a despot, either. It was, in short, a situation of "damned if you do, and damned if you don't." Not being by nature a man with fragile nerves, however, Katzouroubis simply raised his eyebrows, told the squire to wait, and then took his time collecting his bag of utensils—the urine jar, lancets, string for the tourniquet, clean gauze bandages, ointments, and small bottles filled with various liquids and powders used in common remedies. His bag packed, Katzouroubis took a cloak from the wall and flung it over his robes, leaving his distinguishing cap visible. At last he nodded to the squire that he was ready.

Outside it was misting more than raining. Although there was no noticeable precipitation, the air was thick with moisture and the cobbles had a wet sheen. The apothecary's cloak soon glistened with tiny droplets. They moved silently through the darkened streets like two shadows until they came to the royal palace. Here the squire led past a sentry, who evidently recognized him and his authority to bring a stranger inside. They ascended by a back stairway and followed a service corridor until the squire stopped before a closed door and gave a distinctive knock. He was answered almost at once by the opening of the door from the inside. The squire nodded for the apothecary to enter, murmuring, "This is where I leave you, sir apothecary. Lord Guy's squire will look after you from here."

A youth on the other side of the door took over, gesturing for him to follow. Katzouroubis soon found himself deposited in an elegantly appointed chamber with mosaic floors and marble facings on the wall. There were soft Egyptian carpets on the floor, an abundance of silk cushions on the benches and chairs, and dozens of glass oil lamps flickering around the room. It took him a moment to even find the patient.

Up to now, Katzouroubis had seen the Latin Lord of Cyprus only from a distance when he rode through the city. He had always been in armor and mounted. He had looked impressive. Now Guy de Lusignan was wearing a long, loose kaftan, belted with a richly embroidered cord. He wore sandals on his naked feet. He looked smaller, frailer, and older than he had looked mounted and in armor.

"You are the apothecary?" the Lusignan asked in a sharp voice.

Katzouroubis bowed deeply. "I am a physician and, yes, an apothecary as well. At your service, my lord."

"Ah, you speak French." The Lusignan sounded relieved.

"I spent sixteen months with the Brothers of St. John at Jerusalem, my lord."

"Good, good. I need your help," Guy confessed.

"Shall we sit?" Katzouroubis countered, gesturing toward a bench softened with cushions whose gold threads caught the light of the lamps.

Guy nodded absently, pulling his kaftan straight at the back as he sat down and folding the extra material over his knees like an old matron.

"So, what symptoms do you have?" Katzouroubis asked in his calm, professional voice.

"Blood in my urine," Guy admitted in a tight, frightened voice. "And pain in my lower guts."

"Hmm. I will need a urine sample," the doctor told him, turning to open his bag and remove his urine flask. "As for the pain, does it hurt to urinate?"

"Yes, very much."

"A burning? Or stinging?"

"Yes, as if my urine were liquid fire."

"And you need to urinate frequently?"

"It feels like it, but there's nothing there half the time. Just the pain."

"How long have you been impotent, my lord?"

"What makes you think I am?" Guy shot back defensively.

Katzouroubis' eyebrows shot up and he looked at the Frank skeptically.

Guy flung up his hands, grabbed the urine flask from the doctor's hand, and stormed in the direction of the garderobe.

Katzouroubis looked around the room while he waited. The second squire had discreetly disappeared. The only other occupant of the

room was a tiger cat who lay on a cushion looking at him with large, half-closed amber eyes.

Guy returned and thrust the flask at him. Even in the poor light, the apothecary could see that the fluid inside (not much, but enough) was murky and brownish. Not healthy at all.

Katzouroubis jammed a cork stopper firmly down the throat of the flask to seal it, and placed it upright in a leather loop sewn inside his bag that would keep it upright. “I will need to examine it in my laboratory,” he told the patient. “Meanwhile, do you wish to share any other symptoms with me?”

“The pain keeps me awake at nights,” Guy told him, asking himself if it was really the pain or the loneliness and hopelessness of his situation.

“You need to drink more water and less wine,” Katzouroubis advised at once.

“I urinate all the time as it is!” Guy protested.

“You feel the *need* to urinate, you told me, often with meager results. The discomfort would be less if you had water—plenty of water—to pass.”

Guy grunted ambiguously.

“You should also drink the juice of crushed pomegranates morning and night. Five or more pomegranates, to be precise. The harvest is just starting, so you should have no trouble with that.”

“Will it ease the pain?” Guy asked, and Katzouroubis heard an echo of desperation in his voice.

“No,” the doctor admitted honestly before adding, “but I can give you something else for the pain, if you like.”

“Can you give it to me now? Tonight?”

Katzouroubis hesitated, but then nodded, and looked through his bag for the opium.

Chapter Six
Interlude in a Precarious Peace

Caymont, Kingdom of Jerusalem
December 1193

FROM THE "LISTS" ERECTED JUST OUTSIDE the manor came the sound of excited young men shouting and cheering. It was a familiar and comforting sound to Maria Zoë. At thirty-nine, she still thoroughly enjoyed watching skilled knights face off against one another in a joust or melee. Far more important, however, was the fact that so many young men training in the skills of knighthood gave her hope for the future. The Kingdom of Jerusalem had very nearly been lost by Guy de Lusignan on the Horns of Hattin. It had, with the help of large armies of Westerners, clawed back important territories along the coast under the able leadership of Richard of England. However, the heartland of the Kingdom—Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and her own dower lands of Nablus—were still occupied by the Saracens. If they were ever to win those holy (and economically vital) places back, they needed a new generation of knights eager and ready to fight for the Holy Land.

Here on the plain of Caymont, a dozen youths were engaged in the rough- and-tumble training so essential to later battlefield competence. They were being schooled by her husband and his knights, who maintained their own skills not only in mock combat against one another and out hunting, but by playing target to the squires—and more often than not, defeating them left-handed.

Drawn by an explosion of excited shouting, Maria Zoë knelt in the window seat and opened the small casement set in the thick, milky glass so she could get a look at what was causing all the shouting. In the middle of the lists her husband sat on his youngest destrier, a black stallion called Ras Dawit, and he was blindfolded. In the four corners, younger men sat their horses, and as she watched, one put spurs to his horse and launched himself at his lord, blunted lance lowered. Based on the sound alone, Balian nudged his horse around

on his fore hand and lifted his shield in time to parry the blow from the blunted lance. As the lance slid off the shield and the rider galloped past, the bystanders cheered the blindfolded baron.

At once another youth launched himself from a different corner, and again Balian deftly swung his attentive horse to face the threat. Maria Zoë, an excellent horsewoman, could see Ras Dawit's ears twitching and swiveling. He was responding as much to the threat as to his rider's legs, and she smiled as she realized that this was part of the trick: a horse trained to face any man attacking his rider.

It was likewise obvious to the horsewoman Maria Zoë that the youth attacking now wasn't riding very well. He was bouncing too far out of the saddle, and when he collided with her immobile husband, he tumbled backwards into the sand—to the hoots and laughter of the youths collected around the lists.

Maria Zoë sucked in her breath in sympathy and glanced over her shoulder at her waiting woman, Beatrice, who had come to join her at the window. It was Beatrice's eldest son who had just been so publicly disgraced.

Beatrice grimaced and shook her head. "He'll never make up the lost years," she commented realistically. Beatrice's father, Sir Bartholomew, had held a knight's fief from Ibelin for half a century. Despite his sixty-some years, he had been with his lord at Hattin, but in the aftermath of that defeat, Beatrice and all three of her sons had been taken captive by the Saracens. They had been slaves for five years before the Treaty of Ramla freed them. As a result, from the age of eleven to sixteen, her eldest son Bart had sat cross-legged on the dirt floor of a hovel knotting cotton to a frame, the slave of a carpet maker, instead of learning the skills of knighthood.

Before Maria Zoë could comment, she and Beatrice were distracted by the next attack. This came from Beatrice's second son, Amalric. He had been sold to a smith rather than a carpet maker and had returned from captivity not only big and strong, but burning with hatred. He launched himself at his blindfolded lord with the fury of a man who pictured himself in combat with his worst enemy—or maybe just with the determination of a youth who wished to wipe away his brother's humiliation. His attack was strong enough to make Ras Dawit whinny as the horses collided. When Balian leaned forward to knock him back, Amalric grabbed the edge of his shield and tried to twist his opponent off his horse. Balian responded by spurring his horse forward, and Ras Dawit flung himself into the other horse with enough force to stagger him. Meanwhile, Balian wrenched his shield loose and used it to bludgeon the unfortunate Amalric, who (as the hooting and shouting indicated) was soundly outmatched.

“It must be reassuring to see how well your lord husband fights,” Beatrice noted behind Maria Zoë as her second son also hit the dust.

Maria Zoë nodded. “It is—and I don’t doubt your father taught him much of it. He was the drillmaster for the squires when Balian was a youth.”

Beatrice nodded and looked away quickly, because she still had not come to terms with her father’s death. He had lived to see her and the boys return from captivity, but he had died this past autumn. He had found peace at last, she told herself, and he had certainly earned the rest of heaven, but she missed him desperately. He was the only one who fully understood the pain she felt over her youngest son, Joscelyn. Jos had been only six when he was captured, and he had returned a Mamluke and a Muslim. To this day he insisted he would not worship “idols,” called the rest of them “polytheists,” and swore he would return to “his master” (al-Adil) as soon as he reached maturity at fifteen.

She felt a hand on her arm and looked over at the Dowager Queen. The expression in Maria Zoë’s eyes suggested that she did understand. “It is hard to bury a child,” she said softly, “but far harder to watch a child willfully destroy himself.”

Beatrice nodded, blinking back her tears, and drew a deep breath, oblivious to the fact that Maria Zoë was referring to the temper tantrum her eldest son was throwing in the lists below the window. Maria Zoë had not given up hope for Joscelyn—who was, after all, only twelve. He showed an increasing interest in riding and jousting with the other boys his own age, who were all eager squires-in-waiting. Bart, on the other hand, was handicapped not only by the time lost in captivity, but also by a sullen and whiny temperament that alienated his comrades.

“I suppose it’s time we got back to work,” Maria Zoë announced to change the subject, and left the window seat to return to the pile of linens the two women had been sorting through. The linens had been discovered in some trunks under a semi-collapsed roof in one of the partially burned out-buildings. While badly mildewed on discovery, after a thorough washing they were looking quite serviceable. Given the state of their finances, Maria Zoë was determined to let nothing go to waste, and these linens could, she felt, be turned into surcoats, tunics, or, if quilted, gambesons for the squires and aketons for the men-at-arms. For now, however, she was hoping to use them on the tables for the upcoming Christmas feast. Last year they’d had only bare tables; this year she wanted the feast to be more festive. A little more pomp, she felt, would signal hope.

Wild shouting from the lists, however, again distracted her. This

had a different ring to it. It wasn't the usual shouted advice and insults, nor the cheers and boos of judgment. She rushed back to the window and stuck her head out just in time to see two men ride into the lists. Before she had fully recognized who and what they were, her husband (who was no longer blindfolded) flung himself from his horse to embrace one of the riders, who had vaulted down to meet him.

"It's John!" Maria Zoë exclaimed in amazement. "And Aimery! They must have come for Christmas!"

She leaned as far as she could out of the window into the brisk wintry air and called as she waved, "John! Aimery! Welcome home!"

John heard her and waved back, a broad grin on his face.

Maria Zoë had learned dignity at the court in Constantinople. For the first twenty years of her life, she had been trained not to show her emotions, not to "betray" herself to those around her—who were (by definition in Constantinople) her inferiors. But over the last nineteen years she had, piece by piece, broken out of that prison. She grabbed a shawl in passing and hurried out of the solar, calling up the spiral stairs to the floor above, "Eschiva! Come quick! Your lord husband is back!"

Eschiva had been in the nursery with her daughters Burgundia (nine) and Helvis (seven) and her youngest child, four-year-old Aimery. She appeared almost at once at the top of the stairs to ask, "What did you say? Aimery is here? At Caymont?"

"Down in the lists, but he'll be inside shortly."

Eschiva put her hands to her hair, her gown, her face. "I'm not ready for him! I have to change! I need—"

"You have rarely looked as lovely as you do right now," Maria Zoë told her with a smile. She was not lying. Eschiva had bloomed in the more simple rural life of Caymont. At court, in her former capacity as lady to Queen Isabella, Eschiva had been constantly exposed to the problems of the realm—from finances and disputes over land to threats and rumors—without, of course, being able to do anything about any of them. Here at Caymont, she had nothing to worry about but whether her eldest child, eleven-year-old Guy, was taking care of his pony and whether the girls were learning to stitch.

"Oh, no, I must change," Eschiva insisted, disappearing from the top of the stairs. It was not vanity that motivated her; Eschiva had no illusions about being particularly attractive. Rather the opposite—a nagging insecurity that Aimery, who had so often cheated on her in the past, would be disappointed.

Maria Zoë let her be, and turned instead to cross the great hall and descend the stairs to the inner courtyard, reaching it just as her son

and Aimery came through the archway from the road with Balian and a gaggle of young men around them. Aimery had his arm draped over the shoulders of his eldest son, Guy, while John's younger brother Philip, who was the same age as Guy, bounded beside John like an excited puppy.

The past year had been good for Philip, Maria Zoë noted mentally. He had always stood in John's shadow, and to escape it he had often been disobedient, foolish, or wayward. The more John strove to please his father and be ready to step into his shoes, the more Philip rebelled. Maria Zoë could hardly blame her husband for the attention he had showered on John, but she knew Philip had been jealous—until John went away with Aimery and his father turned his attention to his remaining son. Without John to compete against, Philip had become more stable and more congenial. Caught red-handed in a misdemeanor, he had always had the most outrageous excuses, but this last year he had shown he could use his glib tongue to entertain them all. His sharp wit seemed capable of finding the humor in almost any situation, and Maria Zoë could not count the times he had saved them from feeling sorry for themselves with some remark that made them laugh. She was glad to see her husband reach out to Philip and pull him into the circle of his arm as he said something to John that made Philip blush, struggle, and then punch his father—laughing all the while.

Behind the principals trailed Henri de Brie's two sons, Anseau and Conan. They too had been left at Caymont with their mother, Heloise, while their father served Guy de Lusignan on Cyprus. They were clearly trying to attract John's attention, while bringing up the rear was a big, furry dog. The latter was evidently confused by the large crowd and was trying frantically to push his way through them all to John. Maria Zoë laughed: John had his dog at last.

It was nearly midnight before Aimery could be alone with Eschiva. First there had been the boisterous reception by Ibelin's men, then greetings from the household, followed by a meal in the hall with nearly a hundred people, including servants and tenants. Even after the public portion of the day was over, his family had demanded attention. They had eventually seen the younger children off to bed, which meant Aimery had to carry his already sleeping namesake up to his little pallet and tuck Helvis into the big bed she shared with Burgundia and Balian's Meg. But Aimery's oldest son Guy wanted his attention, too. Aimery could have said no—but this last nine months,

watching his brother brooding in his loneliness, had made Aimery see his family in a new light. His brother Guy had worn a crown, but he was now nothing but a lonely, prematurely aged man. So Aimery took the time to talk at length to his brother's namesake until the boy's eyes were falling shut. Only after young Guy had also been sent to bed could Aimery and Eschiva retreat to their own cramped quarters under the eaves.

Closing the door to their little chamber and throwing the bolt, Aimery looked at his wife. Eschiva had always been eclipsed by the women around her: the Greek princess selected for her beauty to be bride to the King of Jerusalem, and that woman's daughter by the notoriously good-looking King Amalric. Eschiva had also served the infamous Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter for a bit, when the latter accompanied her brother King Richard to the Holy Land. Yet even in the absence of more celebrated beauties, Eschiva would never turn men's heads when she walked into a room. She was too slim, too flat, too small. Her hair was a medium brown rather than blond or dark chestnut. Yet her features were harmonious, her lips soft, and her eyes a rich, amber gold—and most of all, she was his. She had been his since she was eight years old, and he so much older that he thought of her not at all.

He would never forget that day he rode back to Ibelin after her father, the Baron of Ramla and Mirabel, was taken captive on the Litani. The Sultan's ransom demands were so ridiculous that he'd pictured Eschiva's entire inheritance—*his* future lands—mortgaged to the hilt to pay them. He'd come to Ibelin to secure those lands by consummating his marriage to Ramla's heiress. He hadn't much cared what she looked like, and he couldn't remember how old she actually was. He'd been waiting impatiently in the hall for what seemed like hours, fuming at the entire situation, when the Dowager Queen had walked in with a lovely little dove beside her, and he'd been stunned to realize that that dove was his wife!

He had consummated their marriage, not with the cold efficiency of greed that had brought him to Ibelin that day, but rather with genuine delight and passion that had fostered a sense of protectiveness and affection. Those feelings had grown into love as time passed. Not that he hadn't dallied with other women in the early years, but his year in Saracen captivity had cured him of his wayward eye. He had returned determined never to stray again, for the sake of his marriage and his soul.

These last nine months had reinforced those feelings. What other woman would ever love him as unquestioningly as Eschiva? Who else would look at him with admiring eyes despite his graying hair and

thickening waist? Where else could he be assured of complete acceptance, regardless of what he did? Even now, after a long absence in a strange land, Eschiva did not question him or ask what he had been up to. Instead she gazed at him, watching his every move, listening to whatever he had to say, smiling whenever he looked at her. She returned even the most casual touch with hungry eagerness.

Now all he had to do was stretch out his arms, and she came into them wordlessly. He folded them around her and swiveled back and forth as if to calm a child, when in fact it was his own racing emotions that he needed to calm. There was so much to say, he could not find any words. So they made love instead, frantically like young lovers and then languidly like old ones, and then they cuddled together like children, and Aimery thanked God for his wife.

While Eschiva fell into a deep, contented sleep, breathing evenly in his arms, Aimery lay awake thinking. For nine months he had argued with his brother Guy about the latter's counterproductive policies. He had been frustrated to the point of madness by Guy's stubborn refusal to consider alternatives. He'd been driven to silent rage by his brother's sullen adherence to the poisonous advice of men like Barlais, Cheneché, and Henri de Brie. He'd begged Guy to at least leave Nicosia and take a look at things for himself—all in vain. For nine months he had racked his brain for an explanation. And tonight he had discovered it.

Guy didn't care what his policies did to Cyprus, and he didn't care if the Cypriots hated him. Guy clung to Cyprus because he had nowhere else to go, but he did not love it or cherish it. Because he had no one to leave it to.

For as long as John could remember, his father had taken him along on rounds of his barony. As a very little boy, he had ridden in his father's lap; later he'd ridden his own pony. His earliest memories were of his father showing him the fields, orchards, mills, and villages of Ibelin. Always, his father had been at pains to explain to him about the different crops and different peoples that made Ibelin rich. Ibelin lay on the fertile coastal plain south of Jaffa, and the sound of seagulls crying and the smell of the salt air, like the yellow dunes, had been part of the landscape.

Caymont, in contrast, lay in an inland valley along a lazy river that almost disappeared in the dry season but after the rains flowed slowly, a muddy brown. The principal crop of the manor domain of Caymont was sugar cane rather than pomegranates and citrus fruits. Irrigation

was essential to the production of sugar cane, Balian explained to his son, as they rode down toward the river from the manor that stood higher up the slope of the rugged hills. Aqueducts brought the water from springs in the mountains to large, stone-lined reservoirs, and ditches funneled it to the upper edges of the fields, where gravity led it down the rows of cane. The fields were divided into plots large enough to be harvested in a single day. They cut off the water to each plot one month before it was due to be harvested, and harvested the sugar one month later. The stalks were brought to the large limestone sugar mill, located in the middle of the fields, to be crushed and processed. Only during the rainy season did the sugar production halt.

They left the manor shortly after the sun lifted itself over the mountain range to the east. Balian urged John to try one of the younger stallions at the stud, with the irresistible argument that "You'll need a second horse once you're knighted." John's spirits soared at the mere thought of knighthood, and he selected a bay stallion with a billowing mane that his father assured him was one of their best. "He's cheeky if you don't pay attention, but intelligent." Philip joined them, riding his own stocky gelding and in irrepressible high spirits.

There were several hawks floating on the morning air, and twice they stopped to let shepherds herd their charges down to the river for watering along the designated paths between the fields of sugar. After crossing the river by ford, they picked up an easy canter through the cane fields on the far side until they reached the vineyards that rose up gently behind the sugar. The vines stretched parallel to the river, and Ibelin slowed to a walk so they could pick their way carefully. Many of the stalks were very tiny and barely visible above the surface of the soil, replacements for the vines trampled down by the Saracen cavalry as they swept through. Fortunately, Balian told his sons, the Sultan's cavalry had not taken the time to systematically destroy the vineyards, and some of the vines had survived. These survivors stood upright and proudly spread their leaves along the strings stretched between the stalks. The leaves were a mustard yellow at this time of year.

Beyond the vineyards the slope became steep and was dotted with olive trees. Here at last Ibelin gave his horse his head. With his eldest son close behind and his younger son trailing, he galloped up a steep, rugged path, both exciting and exhausting the horses.

When at last they crested the hill, the horses slowed of their own free will, breathing heavily, but snorting and shaking their heads in pleasure. Ibelin drew up and, gesturing toward the next valley, remarked, "This is the border."

“It looks like the Sultan hasn’t awarded the land to anyone yet,” John noted observantly, taking in the fact that the valley lay fallow, sprouting weeds rather than useful crops.

“That, or the recipient is too busy intriguing against al-Afdal to spend time here,” his father countered.

John looked over, unsure what this meant; Philip was less inhibited. “Why don’t we take it back?” he asked cheerfully.

“There’s a treaty—” John started to remind his brother in exasperation, but his father cut him off, explaining in a far more patient voice, “Because I swore to uphold the Treaty of Ramla, Philip, a treaty I personally negotiated.”

Philip sighed and looked duly chastised for half a second. Then he cheered up and announced, “I’ll bet there’s lots of game in those woods over there. There’s not anything in the treaty against hunting in unoccupied land, is there?” His father laughed. “No, I didn’t think about that at the time. Maybe another day.” He turned his horse around and they started to descend at a more decorous pace, letting the horses find their footing carefully among the loose stones.

“How are things, Papa?” John asked earnestly.

“Good,” his father answered. Then, recognizing that this answer was not enough for his heir, he elaborated. “We’ve been very lucky. Edwin Shoreham agreed to leave his flourishing business in Tyre to come help us rebuild.” Edwin Shoreham was the carpenter son of Ibelin’s former master sergeant. Ibelin had knighted the elder Shoreham during the defense of Jerusalem, and two of his younger sons had died there. John understood that Edwin (and his shrewd but shrewish wife) had come to Caymont to support the aging Sir Roger and comfort him in his lingering grief over his lost sons.

Balian was continuing, “The rains were good, which helped; but more important, we found good tenants for the outlying farms, the ones producing millet and barley, and—what’s more astonishing—we were able to recruit two score families willing to work in the vineyards and cane fields. They’re almost all Syrians, refugees from southern Galilee and Bethsan.”

“So they’re Orthodox Christians?” John asked, pricking up his ears.

“Yes, Jacobites,” his father confirmed.

“Do they come to church?” John asked next.

“What do you mean? They don’t attend *our* Mass. Most of them don’t speak more than a smattering of French, much less Latin. Their own priest conducts Mass in Arabic according to their rites after our Latin Mass in the chapel is finished. Of course, that’s only because they don’t have a church of their own yet. I’ve allotted them land near

the sugar factory, and most of the rocks we cleared from the irrigation ditches have been piled there for reuse. They hope to start construction soon, now that the rainy season has started and we can't cut the cane anyway."

John nodded thoughtfully, explaining to his father, "Carlo—that's the man who runs the khan where Lord Aimery and I live—says that King Richard promised to let the Greeks on Cyprus retain their churches and monasteries and to live under the laws that had been valid under the Emperor Manuel I. But the Templars tried to make the people follow the Latin rites, and now King Guy is trying to make the churches and monasteries pay taxes to him, although they were exempt in the time of Manuel I. Carlo says that's the main reason the people of Cyprus are up in arms against King Guy."

"Is this rebellion serious, then?" Ibelin asked frowning slightly.

"It's terrible!" John exclaimed. "King Guy claims he doesn't have any income and is afraid to leave Nicosia, while Brie, Barlais, and Cheneché spend all their time burning things down to make people pay up. The Pisans say King Guy and his men are destroying the tax base and impoverishing everyone, not to mention sowing hatred of all Latins and Franks!" John told his father hotly.

That didn't sound good to Balian, and he shook his head. "What does Lord Aimery say?"

"That his brother's crazy, but King Guy won't listen to him any more than to the English knights King Richard left on the island. He doesn't listen to anyone, really. Not even Cheneché and Brie, because *they* keep urging him to assign them territory and let them pacify it, each in their own way."

Balian laughed shortly. "Your cousin wants a barony, John."

"Is that so bad?" John asked back cautiously. After all, that's what Aimery—and in his own heart John, too—wanted. Not one like this, though, cut off from the sea, dependent on unreliable rains, vulnerable to Saracen attack, and haunted by the ghosts of past tenants. . . .

"No, it's perfectly natural," his father answered his question reasonably. "It's what men fight for—land, wealth, fame, and faith—probably in that order. Why does Guy de Lusignan" (John noticed his father did not dignify him with the title "king") "resist carving the island up? It's big and rich enough to support more than a score of baronies, much less reward the handful of men with him."

John weighed his head from side to side. "I'm not sure, but once when Bethsan was pressing for 'clear authority' in one place or another, King Guy snarled that he wasn't about to set up another High Court that could turn against him."

"Ah," Balian nodded knowingly. "So that's the problem." When John and Philip stared at him questioningly, he elaborated, "Guy's never forgotten or forgiven the High Court for opposing him. He's afraid of independent barons, men who have independent opinions, and—more dangerous—sufficient resources to stand on their own feet."

That made sense to John and he nodded, but then he had another thought. "Did you know Humphrey de Toron was with King Guy?"

"I guess I had heard that, but I'd forgotten. You've seen him?" Balian asked with a sideways glance. He too could remember when Humphrey had been like an older brother to John.

"He agrees with Lord Aimery about using less force, but he won't speak up. He says if he spoke up it would do more harm than good."

Balian snorted and conceded, "He's probably right."

"Why do people look down on him so much?" John asked cautiously.

"I don't know about 'people,'" Balian's tone turned tart, "but *I* will never forgive him for betraying us at Nablus, sneaking out in the dark of night to go pay homage to Sibylla, thereby undermining the authority of the High Court and denying Isabella her rightful crown. It was because of him that Guy was crowned king, that your uncle Baldwin fled the Kingdom, that the Count of Tripoli sought a separate peace with Saladin, and ultimately that we found ourselves on the Horns of Hattin."

John knew all that, but it wasn't what he was actually asking about. He tried again. "But that's not everything, is it? I mean, Gauvain de Cheneché accused him of being a sodomite. . . ." John concentrated on guiding his horse as he said this, too embarrassed to risk a glance at his father.

Balian gave his son another sidelong glance and asked back, "You know what that means?"

"I think so. I can't really picture it."

"Oh, I'll show you!" Philip offered, making John snarl at him to "shut up" and Balian laugh before warning sternly, "You'd better not, or I'll have your hide in *this* life—before the Lord sends you to hell for all eternity in the next."

"I just meant I can show John two sodomites painted on the mural of the Last Judgment in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Acre. Ernoul pointed it out to me at Easter."

"I'll have *his* hide for that!" Balian responded, but in a tone that made his sons laugh, and they dropped the topic. John, however, registered that his father had not denied the charge against Toron.

Later that day, a weather front swept in from the West. Stiff winds lashed rain mixed with snow across the valley, and howled around the walls and towers of the manor. By nightfall the peaks of the hills around them were dusted white with snow, but Balian was pleased to have the reservoirs and cisterns refilled. Meanwhile the household, forced inside by the weather, set to work decorating the hall and chapel for the Feast of the Nativity. In the kitchens, preparations were under way for a banquet, and the tenants had brought their solstice payments with the intention of staying through Christmas in order to enjoy Mass at the manor chapel and then partake in the traditional baronial Christmas festivities.

John found himself helping out in a variety of ways, from hanging holly on the walls to helping Father Angelus note and provide receipts for tithe payments. During the latter, John surprised (and amused) Father Angelus with his fluent but eclectic mix of imperial and colloquial (Cypriot!) Greek. They chatted away in this tongue as they worked. "You must show your mother how your Greek has improved!" Father Angelus urged. "She'll be delighted!"

John was not reluctant to follow that advice, but he had a hard time finding an opportunity because his mother was so busy organizing the Christmas festivities. It was not until after compline, when his mother sank down into her favorite chair before the fire in the solar and announced she was exhausted but would like a cup of mulled wine before retiring, that John got his chance.

"*Thelis krasi levko ee kokino*?" John asked his mother, springing to his feet to serve her.

She smiled and answered, "*Levko, parakalo*."

All that was quite simple, but now John surprised her with a flood of Greek—assuring her he would bring her mulled white wine, but only on the condition she stayed up to talk to him a little more. He had a thousand questions for her, he warned.

The smile she gave him would have melted the hearts of monks and mercenaries, much less her teenage son. "Janis," she assured him in Greek, "to hear you speak my mother tongue like that, I would stay up *all* night. Send someone else for the wine!" Switching to French, she twisted around in her chair to call, "Ernoul? Ernoul? Where did he get to?" Although her husband had two squires, there was a division of labor between them. Ernoul, who had been too badly wounded at Hattin to carry arms ever again, no longer kept his lord's armor, arms, or horses; those tasks fell to Georgios. Instead, he was expected to

serve them at table and afterwards.

"Practicing his Christmas concert, of course," her husband answered, coming up behind her. He laid his hands on her shoulders and his thumbs started rubbing the back of her neck, making her close her eyes with a sigh of contentment. "He is more troubadour than squire, and it's time we acknowledged it. He's a father, too. Far too old for squiring. I think I need a new squire, don't you?" he spoke into her serenity.

"Who were you thinking of?" she asked without opening her eyes, while John ducked out to get her the mulled wine she wanted.

"Amalric, Beatrice's middle boy."

Maria Zoë's eyes flew open, and she craned her neck to look up at her husband. "Passing over his older brother? Won't Bart be jealous? Insulted?"

Balian sighed and moved around to seat himself in the chair waiting for him beside her. "Yes and no. He thinks he's already his father's successor and should be knighted."

"He's nowhere near ready!" Maria Zoë protested.

"And he never will be—as he well knows. He wants to avoid the unpleasantness of training and failing for all to see. The bigger problem is, I cannot afford to give him a fief. I need tenants who can work the land, not youths too taken with their alleged status and 'birth rights' to bend their backs to labor. I don't think he'll ever willingly accept that fact. He's already threatened to haul me before the High Court for not giving him a fief."

"The impudent little brat!" Maria Zoë declared indignantly, adding, "He should be grateful you waste time with him at all!" Yet at another level she understood Bart's problem. Precisely because he had been a slave five long years, he was overly sensitive about his status. The Baron of Ibelin might clear irrigation ditches with his tenants, but never Bart d'Auber. She noted cautiously, "On the other hand, you *do* still owe six knights to the feudal army."

"True, and Bart d'Auber will never be one of them," Balian answered firmly, then checked over his shoulders to be sure Beatrice was not within hearing. He'd only broached the topic because he had not seen her here.

"Beatrice asked to go to bed early," Maria Zoë answered his look. "She seemed very tired. I hope she's not ill."

Balian nodded agreement. "I hope she's not, too. Not now, just before Christmas, when you need all the help you can get. But as I was saying, I don't believe Bart will ever make a knight. Amalric, on the other hand, has the right instincts for a fighting man. He's aggressive

and daring without being foolhardy. He's had the nonsense knocked out of him the hard way, and he's surprisingly cagey for a youth of just sixteen. Nor does he shy away from hard work. He's always the first down at the lists, and often the last to leave as well. He knows he's not yet good enough with a sword to survive real combat, which makes him try harder, not less. If I give him a chance, I believe he'll grow into a very solid and trustworthy knight—like his grandfather."

"But if you knight the younger brother and give him a fief, Bart will hate you."

"I didn't say I'd give Amalric a fief. I see him as a household knight. No more. Unless our fortunes change." Changing the subject, he asked after Eschiva and Aimery.

"Off to bed early," Maria Zoë answered with a knowing smile.

"I hope Eschiva *wants* another child," Balian remarked with a slight frown, remembering how frightened his niece had always been of pregnancy.

"She does," Maria Zoë assured him simply.

Balian chose not to pursue this discussion, because at this point John returned with a tray laden with goblets and a wine carafe. He presented both to his mother with a new flood of Greek.

Balian got to his feet. "If the two of you are going to chatter in that incomprehensible tongue, I'll leave you to it." Although he pretended irritation, he was very pleased to see that John had finally mastered a language he had long resisted, and he understood that his wife wanted time alone with her son. He kissed her hand in parting, and left John with his mother.

First John told his mother about his many adventures: how he'd found and adopted Barry, the attack in the tavern (he'd only promised not to tell his *father* about that), King Guy's reception of them, the complaints of the Italian communes, and his adventures in disguise. His cheerful, almost bragging narrative elicited frequent laughter from his mother, sometimes as much for the idiomatic slang picked up on the streets of Nicosia as for the content. When he started talking of the encounter with Lakis, however, his tone turned thoughtful and worried. He ended by asking his mother plaintively, "How could I have helped him?"

He was seated on a cushion at his mother's feet, with Barry's head in his lap. Maria Zoë bent down and kissed the top of his head. "The important thing is that you *wanted* to help him, John."

"From *his* point of view, I don't think that's good enough!" he answered testily.

"No, perhaps not," his mother conceded. Her pride in a son who

worried about how to help others rather than about his dignity (like Bart d'Auber) or his skills at horse and arms (like Amalric) was almost overwhelming. She knew better than to patronize him, however, and so answered practically. "Finding him an apprenticeship would help him most—a bookbinder would be perfect, if there is such a thing in Nicosia. I could ask in Acre if they know of an appropriate shop on Cyprus."

The school of manuscript illustrators, previously attached to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, had re-established itself in Acre. They had been some of the primary beneficiaries of Ibelin's surrender, as there was little doubt that, had Jerusalem fallen to Saladin by assault, the precious Christian texts decorated with images abhorred by Islam would have been destroyed. Because Ibelin's surrender terms allowed the inhabitants of Jerusalem to ransom themselves and remove their portable property, the canons of the Holy Sepulcher had been able to rescue their most precious manuscripts and much of their vellum, parchment, paints, and brushes as well. Furthermore, the monks themselves had looked death in the face as the northern wall of Jerusalem collapsed, and they said daily prayers of thanks for their salvation—and for the Baron of Ibelin. Maria Zoë had no doubt that she could ask a favor of them. "I don't suppose this orphan speaks any French or Latin?" she asked her son, thinking that a place with the scriptorium itself would offer the greatest chance of betterment.

"Lakis? No, he only speaks Greek. Mother?"

"Yes?"

"Just what are the differences between the Greek and the Latin Church?"

Maria Zoë drew a deep breath, and then shook her head. "It's far too late, I'm too tired, and I've had too much wine. We'll have to take up theology another day, if you don't mind."

"But you were raised in the Greek Church," John insisted. "It can't be that different from the Latin Church."

"It's not. The churches differ more on matters of form than content. We—I mean the Greek Orthodox Church—does not recognize the authority of the Pope to determine doctrine, for example, believing that only an ecumenical council of the heads of all the churches can do that. All Eastern Orthodox Churches, as far as I know, also believe that the Holy Spirit springs from the Father but not the Son."

"Is that important?" John asked, frowning.

His mother laughed shortly. "I'm far too tired to know, John, and I can't say it ever mattered to me, but you really ought to put these questions to Father Angelus and Father Michael. They have been your

tutors since before you could read or write, and they have spent the better part of twenty years arguing—amicably, I might point out—about these very matters. If, however, you insist on asking a daughter of the Imperial family of the Eastern Roman Empire, then I will give you a political, rather than a theological, answer."

John grinned. "That's what I want, Mama!"

Maria Zoë laughed, recognizing her husband in her son. "The principal issue is who controls doctrine, and so what people think and believe. In the West, the Pope has established a position of unassailable dominance that allows him to excommunicate kings and call crusades, for example. My ancestors, on the other hand, resisted the idea of allowing any prelate to become that powerful. They preferred to let Church matters be determined by collective discussion—which inherently fostered competition and diversity of opinion and so opportunities to, shall we say, *influence* matters. At times, the divisions could be quite bitter and destructive, as during the iconoclastic strife, but on the whole the tactic allowed the Emperors to retain a powerful voice in Church matters."

"Yes, but that doesn't explain why millers and butchers on Cyprus should prefer to impale themselves on Templar lances than go to a Latin Mass," John protested.

"True," Maria Zoë conceded. "That has little to do with either theology or politics. One might even argue it has to do with the very *absence* of theological understanding. Illiterate people, who inherently understand little of the concepts behind the rituals they follow, often mistake form for content. And then there's the issue of celibacy," she added in a playful tone. "Greek Orthodox priests can marry. They are not prepared to sacrifice that privilege lightly, so they generally rile up their flocks to protect their pleasures."

John's scowl made her realize she had offended him. With a deep breath she forced herself to get serious again and continued, "Mostly, I think, it has to do with preferring to hear services in a language we understand."

"So, why don't we let people worship in whatever language they like?" John asked back earnestly.

"But we do! The Jacobites here hold their services in Arabic," she pointed out. "And have you forgotten there were synagogues and mosques in Nablus? They were only banned from Jerusalem itself—and that more for military rather than theological reasons."

John started slightly. He had forgotten. His mother's lands of Nablus seemed as far away as ancient Rome to John. "Didn't the King of Jerusalem object?" John asked, puzzled.

“Object to what?”

“Letting mosques and synagogues flourish?”

“Not at all. He simply taxed them more heavily,” Maria Zoë replied a bit flippantly, and again regretted it. John was still very earnest. To make up for her tone, she leaned down, put her hands on both his shoulders and spoke very seriously. “There are good and bad men of every faith, John. The beauty of Christianity is it shows us the road to salvation through forgiveness and understanding. But if you really want to know my personal opinion”—Maria Zoë was a little drunk by now and about to confess something she would not have voiced to her more Catholic husband—“I don’t honestly think God cares what rite or formula we use for prayer. I think the only thing that matters to *Him* is *what* we pray for and the sincerity with which we do it.”

John twisted around and looked up at her. “Thank you.”

She kissed his forehead, and then pushed herself to her feet. “And that is the last you will get from me tonight, John. I am going to bed, no matter what you say.”

Chapter Seven
Rebels Against the Hospital

Island of Cyprus
April 1194

Kolossi

IT WAS THE STINK OF BURNED sugar that John would remember the rest of his life.

Word that rebels had attacked the hospital and sugar factory at Kolossi, run by the Knights Hospitaller, had reached Nicosia late on Sunday, but it had taken Lord Aimery two days to convince his brother Guy to let him go to investigate. Aimery and John had left the following morning and ridden hard to reach Limassol by nightfall. Here they had requested and received the hospitality of the Templars, staying overnight in the fortress-like commandery in the heart of the town. Aside from the obvious advantages of a clean bed, hearty food, and security, the Templars had also given refuge to the victims of the brutal attack, and Aimery had been able to interview the Turcopole commander as well as some of the Brother Sergeants from the hospital.

These men reported that a mob two to three hundred strong had attacked the Hospitaller commandery as darkness fell on Friday night. The attackers were not heavily armed, but the Hospitallers swore they must have been tipped off that the Hospitaller commander and all ten knights had left Kolossi to answer a call for assistance from a Venetian vessel in distress off the coast. At the time of the attack, therefore, only the Turcopoles, hospital staff, and lay brothers were on the premises. Furthermore, the factory had already closed for the day. Except for the night watchman, who tended the vats, the workers had dispersed to their homes in the surrounding villages.

Because the Hospitallers had taken over the factory and manor only eight months previously, they had not yet built any kind of defenses. Low stone walls marked the perimeter, while the manor itself consisted of a rectangular stone building over a vaulted chamber that was partially underground. The hall was accessed by a broad exterior

stairway, but there was neither a gap nor a drawbridge separating the top of the stairs from the building. The hospital was nothing but a low vaulted chamber of fieldstone held together with mortar. The church was an old Greek structure, another low vaulted building with a single apse and narrow windows.

The Hospitallers had not been expecting any kind of aggression against them. They had established a hospital that served the poor of the surrounding countryside, and had been treating no fewer than thirty-two patients when the attack occurred. In addition, they had restarted production in the sugar factory, which had lain idle since the fall of Isaac Comnenus, thereby providing jobs to half a hundred workers from local communities. The Brothers of the Hospital were unanimous in expressing their bewilderment at the attack.

"Had there been complaints about wages or the like?" Lord Aimery asked the senior Turcopole.

"No, not at all! We pay better than the local landlords, let alone the mines! Besides, it wasn't our workers who did the damage. The mob consisted of outsiders, for the most part. We recognized only a handful of local youths, troublemakers we had dismissed." The Turcopole was lying in the Templar infirmary, his head bandaged over one eye and his arm in a splint, evidence of his efforts to stop the mob.

"This sounds well organized," Lord Aimery observed dryly.

"Very well organized! They came armed with clubs and axes and they had torches, too. But they looted first. They took not just the plate and furnishings from our hall, they took the wine from our cellars, the grain stacked there, and the olives, too. They even stole the personal belongings of the patients—their own people!—before setting the building on fire!"

"With the patients still inside?" Lord Aimery asked in horror.

"No, no, they dragged them out into the yard, and then went in and searched for valuables, stuffing anything they found into sacks they'd brought with them. *Then* they set the place on fire."

"Who was leading them?" Lord Aimery wanted to know.

"A monk, a Greek monk!" the Turcopole reported, spitting on the floor to show his contempt.

"Young? Old? Fat? Thin? What can you tell me about him?"

"He was young, no more than twenty-five. Not tall, but strongly built with a barrel chest. If it hadn't been for his robes, I would have taken him for a blacksmith or a carpenter. He had a thick black beard, like they all do, and a broad, strong nose. His most striking feature, however, was his eyes: they burned with hatred."

"Anyone else you noticed?"

“Not really. It was getting darker by the second and the torches and fires were blinding, casting everything else into shadow.”

Lord Aimery nodded understanding, and asked if there had been serious casualties. The Turcopole reported that no one had been killed and that he and the other Turcopoles had suffered no injuries more serious than broken bones and bruises, but that the patients and lay brothers serving them were traumatized. There had been four women patients, all more or less elderly women, and they were saying they would never return to Kolossi. One was even demanding admission to a nunnery, although she had not been violated, just roughly handled and insulted.

“They demanded our names—almost as if they were looking for someone, or at least Franks.”

Lord Aimery nodded. He had heard similar stories. The rebels might steal from their fellow Greeks if they were, like the workers and patients of the Hospital, benefiting in any way from the new regime, but they didn’t want to kill their fellow countrymen. Even the Turcopoles were probably spared greater violence because they were natives of Syria, Orthodox rather than Latin. The worst violence was reserved for Latin Christians—Franks and Italians, but especially Franks.

“What happened to your priest?” Lord Aimery thought to ask.

“They stripped him naked and bound him backwards on a mule. Then they hit the mule on the rump to make him run away. We found him the next morning in a field several miles away, still tied to the mule, scratched, cut, and bruised from collisions with trees and God knows what else. He was in a terrible state of mind. He had seen the fires and assumed we were all dead.”

Despite these stories, it was still the smell and sight of the gutted sugar factory that shocked John the most. It was just four months since he had visited his father’s sugar mill. His father had led him around, pointing out the equipment and explaining the process of cutting, crushing, and boiling the raw sugar multiple times until thick molasses formed and dripped into pottery molds. At the time, he had been bored and only pretended interest to please his father. Yet he understood instinctively that his father had spent so much time explaining things to him because he was proud of reopening the sugar mill. From his father’s description of all the problems encountered and costs incurred, John understood it had been very difficult. It would have been no different at Kolossi. The Hospitallers had invested time, money, and heart’s blood to get this factory working again. Now it was a charred hulk oozing foul-smelling smoke, and the floors were

glazed with sticky black pools of burnt sugar.

"Why burn down the sugar mill?" John asked. "It benefited the people in the local communities."

"And because of that, the locals are not so hostile to Frankish rule. The rebels want everyone to hate us," Lord Aimery answered. "What I don't understand is why the workers didn't defend their livelihoods, their employer, their hospital. And who tipped the rebels off that the knights were away? They clearly didn't want to risk a fight with armed knights. Or should I rather ask, who sent word to the commander that a Venetian ship was in distress just down the coast? A phantom ship, it seems, as the Hospitallers rode up and down the coast all night looking for it and never saw any sign of it."

They had not been able to talk to the commander of the Hospitallers at Kolossi, because he and his knights had already left Limassol by ship to report to headquarters in Acre. All in all, Aimery did not think the Hospitaller commander had covered himself in glory, but it wasn't his business. The Order would have to deal with him.

"Do you think you could find anything out from the villagers?" Lord Aimery asked his squire.

John shrugged. "I doubt it. I'm dressed like a Frank."

"Try. I'll be in the church."

While the interior of the manor house and hospital had been torched after the looting, the church had not. The rebels had, of course, helped themselves to the cross, candlesticks, and even the icons, but they had not burned the building itself. Tethering his horse outside, Lord Aimery slipped into the empty church to await his squire's reconnaissance.

John, with Barry loping behind him, rode the half-mile to the nearest village, which sat astride the Limassol-Paphos road at the place where the road to Kolossi branched off it. The village consisted of a well, a threshing floor, and a church similar to that at Kolossi, surrounded by some two dozen low cottages covered with rough, dirty plaster and topped by flat roofs.

As John approached, the barefoot children ran away to their respective houses, and the chickens in the yards scattered. A woman at the well, hearing the high-pitched screams of the children, paused, looked over her shoulder, and at once let go of the rope to flee down the street. The released bucket splashed at the base of the well and the spool continued to unwind several turns, unraveling a yard of rope.

John stopped and looked around for someone to talk to. The village appeared abandoned, but he was certain that many eyes were watching him from inside the narrow windows.

With a sigh he dismounted, tethered Centurion, and approached the first house, with Barry at his heels. He knocked on the closed door. Something scraped and bumped on the far side, but no one answered his knock. He went on to the next house. This time he could hear voices, but still no one answered. Moving to the third house, John felt foolish and frustrated, but he stubbornly decided to knock at every single cottage.

At the fourth, the door cracked and he looked into the face of a young woman. She was anything but pretty. She had a mouth full of crooked teeth and her nose was set at an angle in her face. She looked up at him with the blank eyes of the mentally deranged. “I’m trying to find out what happened to the hospital,” John explained.

The girl shook her head vigorously and tried to shut the door in his face.

John got his foot in the door and shouldered it open. Although the girl tried to stop him, she was much weaker than he, and when she realized it was pointless, she ran to the back of the room and squatted down on the far side of a central hearth with her arms crossed over her head. It made John feel like a marauder.

His eyes swept the room, and he felt his mouth go dry as he registered just how poor these people were. There was literally nothing in this cottage but straw pallets on the floor and a pottery cauldron sitting somewhat precariously on some fieldstones that surrounded a fire. The cauldron was steaming lightly and smelled of garlic, while smoke clouded the whole room; there were neither chimney nor windows for the smoke to escape. An old crone squatted beside the cauldron and squinted at him silently, not daring to challenge his intrusion.

John knew it would be pointless to ask her anything about the attack. He shook his head, mumbled an apology, and withdrew, abandoning his plan to go to every house. Instead, he collected Centurion and rode on to the next village.

This was far enough away so that people did not immediately make a connection between a young Frank and the attack on Kolossi—until he started asking questions. Then they clammed up, shook their heads, and denied all knowledge of events.

Frustrated and hungry, John wanted to return to Kolossi so he and Lord Aimery could get back to Limassol for the night. He did not want to spend a night surrounded by the charred remnants of Kolossi. It emanated not only a foul smell but an ominous threat from the still-smoking ruins. On the other hand, he was reluctant to return to Lord Aimery empty-handed, and so with a sigh he stubbornly retraced his way through the nearest village to continue on to the village farthest

west.

Two priests stood talking in front of the small church, but they slipped inside at the sight of John approaching. John had spotted them, so he rode straight to the church, tethered Centurion to a ring on the surrounding low wall, and ordered Barry to stay with the horse. Barry dutifully sat down at Centurion's feet as the horse voraciously tore up tufts of grass and weeds from the base of the low wall with his teeth.

The door was so low that John had to duck to enter the little church. It was so dark inside that the only thing he could make out was burning candles lighting up a silver icon of the Virgin with the Christ Child on her arm. Immediately John went down on one knee, shoving his coif off his head at the same time. He crossed himself and silently prayed to the Mother of God for help. "Holy Virgin, Lord Aimery wants these people no harm," he argued with her in his mind. "We want to end the violence. Please help me. "

When he stood, his eyes had adjusted enough to see the two Orthodox priests—or rather, a priest and a monk—staring at him warily from the railing before the dark, dilapidated screens. He approached them and addressed them respectfully in his best Greek: "Good sirs, forgive me for interrupting, but I was hoping you could help me." The looks of astonishment on their faces to have a young Frank address them in fluent Greek pleased John.

Their surprise also gave him a moment to study them. The priest had wavy gray hair and a soft, fluffy beard of the same color, but his face was not really old—no older, John guessed, than his father. It was marked by lines made more by smiling than frowning. The monk, on the other hand, was younger, with dark hair and beard, and his face was lined by anger. It also reminded John of someone, but he couldn't quite remember who.

It was the monk who replied hotly, "What do you Franks need help with? Killing, burning, and raping?"

The priest immediately put his hand on the younger man's arm and shook his head. "Curb your tongue, Brother," he told his companion before addressing John to ask, "What might we be able to help you with?"

"The hospital at Kolossi was attacked last Friday by a large mob. They plundered the entire complex, even the church," John stressed, "and they stole from the patients as well. The priest was stripped naked and tied backwards on a mule and then chased away." As he related this incident John watched the faces of the two men opposite him. The monk frowned, while the priest raised his eyebrows and looked over at the younger man as if asking for verification.

“He was not harmed—unlike many of *our* priests, monks, and nuns!” the monk defended the outrage. “Indeed, no one was raped or killed.”

“You seem to know a great deal about what happened,” John observed. “Can you tell me more about who was involved in the attack and why? Why attack a hospital caring for the poor? Why destroy a factory that brought work and income to these poor communities?”

“The land was stolen from us! It is our land! Our country! You are not welcome here!”

“Would it be better for people to have neither medical care nor jobs?” John asked with the simplicity of youth.

“You understand nothing! Just like the rest of your stupid, brutal, barbarian people,” the monk dismissed him angrily.

“You say he understands nothing, yet he asks good questions,” the priest spoke up in a calm, firm voice. “It is what my parishioners have been asking me all week,” he added. “They had little enough as it was. Now they have nothing. They do not know how they are going to feed themselves, and they are terrified of retribution. Up to now, all the trouble has been in the north and east; now they fear the Franks will come and take revenge on us here for this.”

“The Franks need to be shown they are neither wanted nor invincible! They need to learn they have no place here, and that we can fight them! You,” the monk turned on John, “you are not wanted here! Go back where you came from!”

“I can’t,” John answered, his beardless chin raised in proud defiance. “Salah ad-Din took it away.” He pronounced Saladin’s name as he had learned it, in Arabic.

“Well, go fight *him* for it, then! Just because you were beaten by the Saracen doesn’t give you the right to steal from us!” the monk snarled back, raising his voice in anger.

His elder colleague laid a hand on his arm again and spoke to John in a reasonable tone. “Tell us, young man, do you know what will happen to the innocent people who had nothing to do with this attack? Will Lusignan send men to scourge the villages that have already suffered?”

“Not all the villagers were innocent, my lord,” John countered. “Some were young men dismissed from work for being troublemakers —”

“Patriots!” the monk corrected.

“That’s enough!” the priest admonished his colleague. Turning again to John, he asked, “If we were to deliver to you the ringleaders, would

you spare the others?"

The monk gasped in shock and looked at his colleague in outrage. The priest looked him straight in the eye as he spoke in a slow, deliberate, and admonishing tone. "Don't you think that is *fair*, Brother Zotikos? Young men who plunder, burn, and terrorize a hospital are not productive members of society." Turning back to John, he noted sternly, "But we must have a guarantee that the innocent people will be left in peace. Many of my parishioners have come to me in tears saying they will help rebuild everything, if only the Hospitallers will return and re-establish the hospital and the mill. They deeply regret what has happened. They should not be punished."

"I will tell my lord what you have said. I'm sure he will want to discuss this with you. Who should he ask to speak with?"

"I am Father Andronikos. He can find me here any time. And who is your lord?"

"Lord Aimery de Lusignan," John announced proudly, harvesting a hiss of hostility from the monk and a startled look from Father Andronikos.

"And you?" the monk snarled. "Who the hell are you, and where did you learn Greek?" He inferred that John's command of Greek was tantamount to deception.

John smiled at him and announced with relish, "My name is John d'Ibelin, and my Greek I learned from my mother, Maria Comnena."

The name had the effect intended. The clerics dropped their jaws and gaped at him in astonishment.

John took advantage of their amazement to bow deeply to the priest and nod curtly to the monk, then he turned and exited the church, trying hard not to reveal his excitement. Outside, he untied Centurion and pulled himself up into the saddle, so full of pent-up hope that the old horse picked up his ears and started prancing in anticipation. John was so elated, in fact, that he felt almost as if he were flying as they cantered along the road back to Kolossi, with Barry pressed hard to keep up. This little incident convinced John he had inherited some of his father's diplomatic skills, and that made him immensely proud.

Nicosia, Cyprus

Lord Aimery was considerably less ecstatic about John's "negotiations." He pointed out that they had no way of knowing if the priest would deliver the real culprits—or someone else. He also

grumbled about the fact that it would be hard to convince his brother to agree to talks—but he eventually agreed to try. They spent the night with the Templars at Limassol again and headed for Nicosia the following day. They arrived well after dark in a rain shower, and Lord Aimery opted to get out of their wet clothes, have a warm meal, and confront his brother in the morning.

John had a hard time sleeping. He kept going over in his head all the arguments for at least meeting with Father Andronikos again. If the priest failed to deliver men that the Hospitallers could identify as part of the mob, they could still opt for retribution, John thought. He was acutely conscious that the lives—or at least the welfare—of many souls depended on what he did or said. He wished he could have turned this over to his father and let his father do the talking from now on. He was certain that his father could have talked Guy into negotiating; John was not so certain about his own or Lord Aimery's ability to do the same.

Since he wasn't sleeping anyway, John rose early, washed and dressed, and then took a brush to Lord Aimery's suede boots and even scrubbed his chain mail. By the time Lord Aimery finally woke up, everything was waiting for him. After helping him dress, John went out for fresh bread, while Lord Aimery got a shave from the khan barber. Fortified with breakfast, they at last crossed the street to the royal palace. They were admitted immediately by the guards and proceeded to Guy's apartments, only to find Dick de Camville guarding the door to the inner chamber against a room full of audience-seekers. Humphrey de Toron was here, as were both the elder and younger Cheneché, Bethsan, Barlais, and the Venetian bailli.

"Well, if it isn't Lord Aimery!" Cheneché called out as they stopped just inside the door, both surprised and irritated by the sight of the others. "Let's see if he'll see *you*. He hasn't been willing to see any of *us* for days."

"Why is that?"

Cheneché shrugged eloquently, and Bethsan grumbled, "If we knew the answer to that, we probably wouldn't be here."

Lord Aimery turned to his brother's squire. "Tell my brother I'm here," he ordered.

"Yes, my lord." Dick bobbed his head respectfully and disappeared through the door between the outer and inner chambers.

Toron left the window seat and came across the room to speak to John in a low voice. "Did you find out anything about the attack on Kolossi?"

"Yes, we were able to talk to the victims, and I found a priest who

said he'd deliver the perpetrators if we promised not to take action against the innocent." John spoke in an excited rush, but with his voice pitched so only Toron could hear him.

Toron looked startled at his news, but pleased, too. He smiled faintly and seemed on the brink of asking something when Dick returned and announced, "He'll see you, my lord."

"What?" Cheneché sat up sharply and exchanged a startled look with his son, while the Venetian looked outright offended.

Lord Aimery strode between them with John clinging to his heels, much as Barry clung to his most of the time, but Dick shook his head at John. "He said his brother. Just his brother."

Deflated, John stopped in his tracks and watched as Lord Aimery disappeared into the room beyond. Dick closed the door firmly behind him and resumed his guard-dog stance.

Beyond the door, Aimery found himself facing his brother Guy. His first thought was that Guy was looking worse than ever. He'd lost weight, and the skin of his face and neck sagged like an old man's. His eyes were sunken in sockets lined with blue. "Well?" Guy asked anxiously. "What did you find out?"

Aimery was taken aback by his brother's intense interest in this case. After all, it wasn't the first time the rebels had attacked. Then again, it was the first instance of violence on the south coast, and also the first time the insurgents had struck at one of the militant orders rather than just merchants and isolated knights. Glad of his brother's interest, Aimery responded readily, "We were able to talk with the Hospitallers, and John spoke to some of the locals as well. The men behind the attack first lured the Hospitaller knights away with a decoy, a request for assistance from a Venetian ship, and attacked at dusk after the workers had left the factories. They looted and—"

"But who *were* they?" Guy interrupted him anxiously. "And where are they now? They all got away, didn't they? They could be anywhere! Anywhere! Even here in Nicosia! Indeed, right here in this palace!" Guy's eyes were burning with fear—no, Aimery revised his assessment, with sheer panic.

He tried to counter the panic with a dismissive, "Of course they're not here in the palace!"

"YOU ALWAYS THINK YOU KNOW BEST!" Guy shouted, springing to his feet. His voice was so loud and furious that Aimery drew back slightly.

"Guy, calm down," Aimery urged in a soft voice to get his brother to lower his. Guy glared at him, breathing hard, the panic still in his unsettled eyes. "Listen to me," Aimery continued as calmly as possible,

although his pulse was racing at the obvious irrationality of his brother's reaction. His mind was racing, too, trying to figure out what had so unnerved Guy that he would be in a state of panic about this comparatively minor incident. "Listen to me," Aimery repeated, as Guy's eyes darted around the room as if expecting assassins to spring out from behind the furnishings. "The leader of the mob was a young Greek monk."

"A monk? You mean we can't even trust their monks? Where are we? Are we both dead and in hell? Does the devil have monks in his service?" Guy asked the question as if he seriously meant it.

"You're not dead, Guy, and I seriously doubt the devil has monks, but evil men have been known to wear clerical robes often enough. The point is: there are no Greek monks here. You're perfectly safe. You're well guarded. As I was saying, these men first lured the knights away from Kolossi. They are afraid to fight us face to face."

"All the more reason that they will send an assassin!" Guy answered, spinning around as if he had heard something behind him. "Or poison! They could use poison!"

"Guy, listen to me," Aimery tried again. "There's nothing to fear. These are cowardly rabble-rousers, not assassins. They tied a helpless priest to a mule. They aren't going to attack *you*. They wouldn't dare."

"How can you be so sure?" Guy countered sharply, his eyes narrowing. "You always think you know best, but you told me to come here. You told me Cyprus was beautiful—and bountiful. You *lied* to me, Aimery."

Aimery gazed at his brother, speechless: it was true, he had urged Guy to come. He had indeed called Cyprus beautiful and bountiful. He still thought it was, but what did his brother know of it, since he hardly ever left these rooms? And slowly, day by day, it was going up in smoke, slipping from their fingers.

"Leave me," Guy ordered abruptly, sinking down into a chair, his shoulders sagging.

"Don't you want—"

"No, it doesn't matter," Guy declared as if he were talking about a spilt glass of wine. He wiggled his fingers in a belittling gesture for Aimery to go. "I know you lied, but I suppose you meant well. It doesn't matter anymore. Leave me. I'm tired."

"Do you wish to speak to any of the others?" Aimery asked as he withdrew toward the door.

"What others?" Guy asked listlessly.

Aimery looked sideways at the door and then back at his brother. "There's an anteroom full of men waiting to see you, Guy. The

Chenechés, Barlais, Toron, Bethsan, the bailli—"

"Oh, them. Yes. I'd forgotten. No. I don't want to see them. Just leave me alone. No! Send Dick in. I need to see the boy!"

"All right, Guy. I'll send Dick in to you," Aimery answered evenly. Then he turned and exited the chamber with a rising sense of panic—not because his brother's panic was contagious, but because his brother appeared to be going mad.

"My lord?" Dick asked as the door clunked shut behind him, dampening the sound of the others as they pounced on Aimery to ask what had happened. Guy beckoned his squire closer, and Dick approached warily. In the last few months Guy had struck him more than once, always without warning—much less cause. As a result, he treated his lord with the same caution he would use with a bull or a mean-tempered horse.

Only when Dick was directly beside him did Guy speak in a whisper. "I'm out of medicine. I need more. Go at once."

"But the doctor said—"

Guy lashed out. Despite his deteriorating health, he had been a fighting man for thirty years, and his balled fist could still deliver a substantial blow. He also knew where to aim, and his punch landed firmly in Dick's gut. The squire doubled over in pain, and Guy hissed at him. "Don't talk back to me, you miserable milksop! I said I need more medicine! Get it now or I'll have you flogged for your rudeness!"

Biting down on his lip and trying to hold back tears of pain and indignation, Dick turned away. He did not right himself until he reached the door. There he took a moment to collect himself, pulled the door open, and slipped out.

Chapter Eight
Disinherited

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem
June 1194

"Is my mother here yet?" the Queen asked breathlessly as the contraction eased.

At once one of her women ordered another to go and see if there was any sign of the Dowager Queen, while another patted the Queen's arm and told her to relax.

"How can I relax?" Isabella shot back irritably, and then gave a cry of pain as the next contraction overwhelmed her.

"Everything's fine," the midwife assured her with professional calm from her position squatting in front of the birthing stool and looking up the Queen's skirts.

"Why doesn't the baby come?" Isabella wailed back at her. She'd been in labor for what seemed like eternity. She was exhausted, drenched in sweat, stinking, and miserable, and the spasms of excruciating pain would not end until it was over. She was sure it had not hurt this much or lasted this long when she gave birth to little Maria. For a son, of course, it would be worth it. She so wanted to give Henri a son, an heir, the start of the Champagne dynasty on the throne of Jerusalem, but first she had to survive this ordeal and the baby had to be born alive, and—the pain obliterated all thoughts as she screamed.

In the courtyard, Maria Zoë and Balian looked up toward the window from which the scream escaped, a long, distant wail that seemed frail and weak by the time it drifted down to them. Eschiva put their thoughts into words. "Poor Bella!" she exclaimed, and at once began to clamber down from the horse litter without waiting for assistance from anyone. Eschiva was herself seven months pregnant, and Maria Zoë had tried to dissuade her from making the trip from Caymont at all. Eschiva, however, insisted, because she remembered how emotionally fragile Isabella had been at her last lying-in.

"I'll see if I can find Champagne," Balian told his wife. "I expect he's

suffering nearly as much as Bella is, and he'll either want distraction or be ready to kill anyone who comes near him. If he's in the latter mood, I'll retreat to the hall."

"What were you like in these circumstances?" Maria Zoë asked curiously.

"I generally wanted to kill someone."

"Charming."

"Just concern for you, my love." He bent and brushed his lips to her forehead.

Maria Zoë, trailed by Eschiva and Beatrice, made her way up the stairs and through the familiar corridors of the palace of Acre to the royal apartments. She had occupied these herself as Queen of Jerusalem twenty years ago. Isabella had herself been born in the very chamber where she now labored.

As they approached the Queen's apartments, Beatrice's sister came out, and catching sight of her sister, ran forward to embrace her. "I was hoping you'd come!" Constance exclaimed. "I'm having such a terrible time with Anne. You have to talk to her. Maybe she'll listen to you." Constance, like Beatrice, had been in Saracen captivity for five years, and her daughter Anne had been circumcised and sold to a man she abhorred at the age of eleven. The scars left on her body and psyche had been evident the moment she was freed.

"Of course I'll talk to her," Beatrice assured her sister. While Eschiva and Maria Zoë continued to the birthing chamber, the Auber sisters slipped down the corridor to have a private chat and reunion.

Isabella lifted her head at the sound of the door opening. Seeing her mother, she exclaimed in a voice that expressed both relief and exasperation, "Mama! What took you so long?"

Maria Zoë went to her daughter and took her hand from one of her waiting women, who at once withdrew. She smiled down at her eldest daughter. "So, you held back just so I could be here, did you?"

Isabella started to protest, and then realized her mother was teasing her and didn't know how to react. Her mother took advantage of her confusion to continue, "We took longer to get here because Eschiva wanted to come, too, and couldn't ride in her condition. I hope you *appreciate* Eschiva coming all this way in her condition to be with you. Your stepfather and I tried to dissuade her—"

Isabella's eyes shifted to Eschiva as she exclaimed, "Oh, I *am* grateful, Eschiva! I can't *say* how grateful I am. I swear I'll be with you when your time comes, no matter what."

"I'll hold you to that promise, Bella," Eschiva told her with a smile, moving around the midwife to take her other hand, which she

squeezed as she looked sympathetically down at her childhood friend. Although her tone was light, Eschiva knew she was going to need all the support she could get when her time came. Much as she wanted more children, she still had a deathly fear of childbirth.

"Now that that's settled," Maria Zoë continued matter-of-factly, "tell me what names you've selected," she ordered her daughter. "Henri, I presume, if it's a boy, but what does your lord husband want to name a daughter?"

"Oh, I told him not to worry about that. I assured him it was going to be a boy," Isabella declared.

"Hmm. I'm not sure that was wise, sweetheart, but what's done is done. I guess we'll just have to think up something for ourselves—just in case. What names do you recommend, Eschiva?"

The midwife glanced up at the Dowager Queen with a faint smile and shook her head in bemusement. She had been dismissive of the Queen's demands for her mother, thinking she had enough assistance with four ladies and an experienced midwife such as herself. Now that the Dowager was here, however, she understood: the Dowager distracted Isabella with a sovereignty that could not be dismissed. Queen Maria simply commanded attention, even from another Queen.

The Count of Champagne was actively seeking distraction, with little success. His household knights, bachelors who had come with him from Champagne, tried to interest him in a game of dice, but after only a short interval Champagne threw the dice down and, with uncharacteristic harshness, told them that it was "heartless" to dice while his wife struggled for her life. They took the hint and withdrew.

Next the Chancellor attempted to interest Champagne in the business of his realm, only to realize that Champagne wasn't listening to a word he said. Rapidly recognizing that any decision Champagne made under the circumstances was likely to be a poor one, the Chancellor Archbishop somberly suggested that Champagne retire to the chapel and pray for the well-being of his wife and child. "Prayers are needed regardless of whether they live or die, after all," the celibate churchman pointed out with great sincerity.

"Get out of my sight!" the usually soft-spoken count shouted. "Out! Out!" Champagne seemed on the verge of throwing something at him.

The shocked chancellor beat a hasty retreat, leaving all the documents lying on the desk, and feeling most unjustly mistreated. As he scuttled down the hall, he nearly collided with a man coming the other way, and was taken aback to find himself confronted by a tall man in chain mail. The figure looming out of the darkness made him catch his breath, and then a voice assured him, "No need for alarm,

my lord archbishop. It's just me. Ibelin."

"Praise to the Father and Son! Then your lady wife is also here to be with her daughter?"

"She is. How is my lord of Champagne taking things?"

"Badly," the archbishop summarized sourly.

Ibelin just laughed. "I'll brave it." He continued past the archbishop and knocked while opening the door.

Champagne spun around with an expression on his face that suggested he was preparing to throw whoever it was out. At the sight of Ibelin, his expression changed to relief. "Thank God! They tell me Isabella has been asking for her mother every few minutes, although for the life of me I can't think what difference it could make. Your lady could hardly have had *her* mother with her during the birth of her children, did she? I know my mother didn't, seeing as my grandmother was very much persona non grata in the house!" Ibelin recognized Champagne's need to let out his thoughts, so he simply helped himself to a chair, then removed his leather riding gloves and ran a hand through his tangled hair.

"You look very hot and dusty," Champagne noticed at last. "Shall I send for something?"

"Sherbet would be very welcome. How long has Isabella been in labor?"

"Almost a whole day now. Did your wife take this long?"

"Longer with Helvis, less with John and Meg. Philip was the hardest birth, as I remember. Or maybe it was just the weather. He came in a dreadful storm, and I had nowhere to escape to."

"So you didn't stay near?" Champagne asked.

"Near enough, but I admit I was cowardly enough to prefer the stables or the tiltyard to sitting where I could hear every scream."

Champagne took a breath and then shook his head. "I can't. I just can't. I'm terrified that if I'm not within hearing, she might call for me and I wouldn't be there. At least when she was brought to childbed with little Marie, I could spend the time cursing Montferrat! Now I have no one to blame but myself!"

Ibelin laughed. At moments like this he both liked the young man who was his king and understood why Isabella was head over heels in love with him. With sympathy, he gently kept Champagne talking about things he cared about, first asking after little Marie, and then turning the conversation to the County of Champagne, asking what Henri had heard from his brother. Eventually, as the sun sank down to pour through the windows, they talked about the full-scale war that

had broken out between Henri's two uncles, the Kings of England and France.

"I can't blame my uncle of England!" Henri declared decisively. "Philip betrayed him in every way! He intrigued against him while he was still here with us, and would have put the crown of England on that spider John! You'd know just how ridiculous *that* idea is if you'd ever met my cousin John!" Henri assured Ibelin. "And while Philip was not to blame for Richard's capture *per se*, he offered to pay *more* than any ransom my grandmother raised to free Richard, for the Holy Roman Emperor to turn Richard over to *him*! I shudder to think what he would have done to Richard once he had him in his power. Chains would have been the least of it! There are times," Champagne admitted, "when I am ashamed to be related to Philip Capet. He is a weasel. A man without a shred of honor."

"I so wanted to like him," Ibelin reflected. "He was the first of the Western monarchs to come to our aid, and I wanted him to be, well, like Richard of England was."

Henri snorted. "They couldn't be more different, could they? I think, sometimes—" Henri cut himself short and his head came up sharply. "What was that? Didn't you hear it? I think it was the cry of an infant!" Champagne jumped to his feet and rushed to the door to stick his head out. Ibelin waited patiently.

"There it is again!" Champagne exclaimed. "No! Christ! It's sobbing, wailing!"

Ibelin calmly got to his feet and joined Champagne at the door to the hall, his ears cocked. From here it sounded as if the shouts and screams of pain that had punctuated the entire afternoon had been replaced by the wailing of a woman in grief.

"The child's dead! Or Isabella herself!" Champagne concluded, his face blanched in horror.

But then another wail pierced the air, clearly an infant crying loudly and indignantly. "Isabella!" Champagne concluded. "She's died giving birth—"

"I think not," Ibelin countered, taking Champagne by the arm and guiding him back into the room.

"But if the child's healthy—and he sounded healthy—why else would they be weeping and lamenting?"

"Did you ever consider the possibility that this child might be a girl?" Ibelin asked.

Champagne looked at him blankly.

"The Dowager Queen gave King Amalric a daughter, and then our first child was also a daughter. Isabella might well take after her."

"A daughter?" Champagne asked back, still looking rather dazed. "Why would they lament the birth of a daughter? It can't be that. Something must have gone wrong!"

Ibelin was relieved by Champagne's response, and suggested, "Let's go to your wife's apartments and see what we can find out."

Champagne nodded, grateful to have company, as the sound of hysterical weeping grew louder the closer they got to the Queen's chamber. Then suddenly the Dowager Queen was standing in their way, smiling broadly. "I was just coming to see you, my lord," she addressed Champagne. "Your wife has been safely delivered of a lovely little girl."

"Is she all right? Is Bella all right? Why is she or someone else crying so piteously? What's wrong?" Champagne demanded.

Maria Zoë rested her hand reassuringly on Champagne's arm. "I promise you, my lord, there is no cause for alarm. Bella is only disappointed she did not give you a son. Give us a few moments to clean things up, and then come see her and your daughter. Meanwhile, I will tell Bella that you are very pleased with your little girl. Did you have a name in mind? Bella insisted there was no need, but I'm *sure* you had more foresight." There was a hint in those words that Champagne instantly understood. If he showed himself ready with a name, Isabella would believe he was not so disappointed.

"Marguerite," he told her instantly. "I had a sister Marguerite."

"It is a lovely name, my lord. We favored it ourselves. I'm sure Isabella will be delighted with it." She bowed her head slightly and then withdrew, leaving Champagne with her husband.

Maria Zoë and Eschiva left Isabella sleeping contentedly in a fresh, clean bed, with the cradle of little Marguerite in easy reach, and Champagne sitting on her other side holding her hand. Together they found Balian in the hall, and Maria Zoë suggested, "I could use some fresh sea air. What do you say we go down to the harbor? Do you feel up to a little walk, Eschiva?"

Eschiva nodded vigorously. Like Maria Zoë herself, she had had more than enough of the stale, sweat- and blood-drenched air of the birthing chamber. She wanted to clear her head of the sounds and sights as well as the smells. It would all start again too soon, but for now some fresh air and chilled wine would do her good. "We should celebrate little Marguerite's birth," she told her aunt and uncle as they left the palace. "At the very least, we ought to light a candle for her and for Isabella. St. Sebastian is not far away," Eschiva suggested; she had fond memories of this little monastery nestled near the port, because she and Aimery had once enjoyed an unexpected and blissful

night together there.

Balian remembered it as the house where Beatrice and Constance's father had sought refuge and faith, when they were in captivity and he had lost all hope of them ever coming home. He noted, "They serve very good wine and simple but good food."

"We might as well stay there rather than at the palace," Maria Zoë concluded; "neither Henri nor Isabella will be entertaining for a bit."

"I'm agreeable," Balian assured the women, and turned to give instructions for his squire Georgios to return to the palace for the horses and their luggage, and to tell Beatrice (who was staying with her sister) where to find them in the morning. "Tell her we'll want to leave no later than terce," Maria Zoë added. Georgios nodded and departed.

They agreed to walk along the harbor front first, enjoying the cooling breeze off the water and a spectacular sunset that turned the horizon a vivid orange. The port, as always, was bustling with ships loading and offloading, street vendors catering to the newly arrived sailors desperate for fresh fruits and women, and customs officials and shipping agents intent on getting their due. With the truce now eighteen months old, trade had built up steadily. Furthermore, with fewer ports in Frankish hands, more trade passed through Acre than ever before. Although ships from the Italian communes—Pisa, Venice, and Genoa—dominated the harbor, there were a pair of Egyptian coastal dhows offloading on the backside of the mole, and a large buss hailing from Marseilles hogging much of the main quay, while a Sicilian round ship was demanding access through the chain. All these larger ships almost obscured a low-lying galley, but Ibelin spotted and recognized the Norse snecka. "Look, isn't that the *Storm Bird*?" He pointed.

The ship was painted black with red trim. She sat low to the water and boasted twenty banks of oars. She stood out from the other galleys because she carried a large square sail rather than the more popular lateen rigs of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the bird on her raised prow—with spread wings, open beak, and blood-red eyes—was familiar.

"It does look like her," Maria Zoë agreed, following her husband's finger. "I thought Master Magnussen had left the Holy Land for good."

"That's what he said, but unless he's dead or has sold the *Storm Bird*, he must have changed his mind."

The trio changed direction and headed over to the snecka, which seven years earlier had been the first ship to successfully run the Saracen blockade of Tyre, bringing a shipload of Norsemen eager to regain the Holy Land. The captain and Ibelin had worked closely

together thereafter. Ibelin regularly used the ship when the land route was impassable or too slow.

The Norse ship lay neatly tied up at the quay, but there was no sign of her captain, or indeed any of the crew except an unfamiliar boy. Ibelin asked the latter when the ship had arrived and from where.

"We left Limassol last night," the boy readily told them.

"Do you know where Master Magnussen is?" Ibelin asked next, but the boy only shook his head.

"Let's go back to St. Sebastian," Eschiva suggested; "you can send Georgios to ask after Magnussen later."

Her companions agreed, and they retraced their steps to the little monastery, knocking at the door with the brass ring hanging from a lion's head.

The brother that opened for them looked astonished. "My lord d'Ibelin!" he recognized Balian at once. "How did you get word so soon? We hadn't even—"

Beyond him in the courtyard there was a bustle of activity punctuated by the barking of a dog. "That's John's dog!" Maria Zoë exclaimed, recognizing Barry. "John must be back again!"

Eschiva pushed through the door that the monk was holding open for them, asking even as she searched the courtyard with her own eyes, "And my lord husband, Lord Aimery de Lusignan? Is he—Aimery!" She started running forward as fast as her heavy, unbalanced body allowed.

Aimery had been bending over going through one of his saddlebags when he heard the sound of his wife's voice. He straightened and spun about to face her.

Eschiva was halfway to him when she registered his face, and her steps faltered. There was no answering smile, no open arms. Her husband looked like he had turned to stone, a middle-aged man with deep lines in his face and gray in his hair. "Aimery?" Eschiva asked, frightened. "Aimery? What is it?"

Aimery turned his back on her and plunged into the shadow of the church porch. Eschiva gave a cry of pain, and her knees started to give way under her. Aimery had rejected her. He was discarding her, just as her father had discarded her mother. He was—Eschiva felt dizzy with confusion and hurt, and Maria Zoë only barely caught her elbow in time to stop her from crumpling up onto the stones.

But on her other side and coming from the other direction, John bounded forward to embrace his father, flushed and breathless. Then he stood back to announce, "Guy's dead! He's been sick for over a year, but he tried to hide it. His insides rotted. He was in terrible pain

toward the end, and then even the opium didn't help anymore."

"But what are you doing here?" Balian asked frowning. "If Guy's dead, Aimery—"

"That's just it! On his deathbed, Guy named his brother Geoffrey his heir!"

"Holy Mother of God!" Maria Zoë gasped, tightening her hold on Eschiva, who was swaying in her distress.

Her husband was more explicit. "Idiot. Absolute idiot! Right to his dying breath: an idiot! Not to mention a thankless bastard."

"Lord Aimery couldn't bear to stay a moment longer," John explained breathlessly. "I hardly had time to pack our things, and we headed for the coast. And you wouldn't believe it! Just as we reached Larnaka, we spotted the *Storm Bird* lying alongside. I jumped on board and told Master Magnussen what had happened. He didn't even bat an eye. He just ordered his men to lay down a plank for our horses and then put out to sea again. He hasn't changed at all," John added in obvious enthusiasm. For John, the excitement of all that had happened in the last forty-eight hours still obscured the implications.

Balian clapped a hand on John's shoulder, both in pride and to calm him down a bit. His eyes had already shifted to the darkness of the church porch where Aimery had disappeared, but his expression was impenetrable.

"I must go to him," Eschiva said at last, pulling herself together.

Maria Zoë nodded, but also tightened her hold around Eschiva's waist and started forward with her.

"We were on our way to Caymont," John continued explaining to his father behind them. "We had no idea you were in Acre. Is the High Court in session?"

"No, Isabella just gave birth. She sent for your mother," Balian answered his son.

"Is Bella all right?" John asked anxiously.

"Yes, she's fine. She had a second little girl."

"Oh!" John sounded more disappointed than the father had been. "But we need an heir for Jerusalem."

"There's plenty of time for that," Balian answered.

Ahead of him, the two women disappeared into the church. As their eyes adjusted, Eschiva registered that Aimery was not in the church, but that the door opening to the cloisters was open. She nodded in that direction, and they crossed the church to step down a couple of steps into the arcade of the cloister. Here Eschiva's eyes found Aimery. He was on a stone bench with his head in his hands. She nodded to

Maria Zoë. “I’ll be fine. Let me go on alone.”

Maria Zoë reluctantly let her go, and stood watching as Eschiva bravely made her way around the cloisters to the bench, sat down beside her broken husband, and put an arm over his shoulders.

Aimery gasped out without even lifting his head: “I’ve failed you, Eschiva. You and the children. I’ve failed completely. I have absolutely nothing. Our child,” he glanced at her distended belly, “conceived in so much hope, will be born in poverty.”

Eschiva didn’t have an answer. All she could do was hold him closer to her. Just as long as he wasn’t divorcing her, she kept thinking, just as long as he wasn’t setting her aside, turning her out like her father had discarded her mother. “We are still together, Aimery,” she squeaked out, so shaken by the way he’d turned his back on her that it came out more like a question.

Aimery sat up straighter and looked into her frightened face. “Eschiva? I’m sorry!” He opened his arms and pulled her into them, clinging to her as much for his own comfort as for hers.

At the far side of the cloisters, John and Balian joined Maria Zoë. Balian waited respectfully for Aimery and Eschiva to finish kissing, but then he started to make his way toward them.

“Balian.” Maria Zoë reached out a hand to stop him, thinking that Aimery and Eschiva needed a little more time.

Already the sound of Balian’s boots on the flagstones had caught Aimery’s attention, and he drew back and sat up straighter. His entire body and face were taut with wary anticipation.

John and Maria Zoë fell in behind Balian, sensing that he must have something important to say.

Balian came to a stop in front of Aimery and Eschiva, and the older man looked up at him grimly, unsure what he should say. Part of him wanted to blame Ibelin for sending him to Cyprus in the first place. He should have stayed and defended his innocence before the High Court. He should never have resigned as Constable. He should—

“Look, Aimery, your idiot brother may have *named* Geoffrey his heir, but I wouldn’t bet on his chances of ever claiming that inheritance.”

“Why not?” Aimery snapped back, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“Do you honestly think that the men who have spent the better part of two years fighting to gain control of Cyprus are about to relinquish their gains—or claims—to someone who hasn’t been risking his hide with them? My nephew Henri, you can be damned sure, wouldn’t dream of such a thing, not even in a nightmare.”

Aimery's eyes narrowed, and he slowly withdrew his arm from Eschiva to sit tensely focused on Ibelin. "What are you saying?"

"How many times in the history of this Kingdom have men from the West been the 'rightful' heir, only to lose out to men already here? The precedent was set from the very start with the election of Baldwin I. Now is no different. My nephew, Toron, Cheneché, Bethsan, even Barlais—they know you, they trust you, and they respect you. If you want them to recognize you as Guy's heir, do what Guy, in his stubborn idiocy, wouldn't do: give them each enough land so they can feel richly rewarded, and keep enough for yourself to win new vassals. This city and Tyre are *flooded* with men who have lost everything. If you promise them something, *anything*, just a *foothold*, they will flood to your banner. They will practically swim across to Cyprus for the chance of a new beginning." Maria Zoë found herself wondering if her husband was speaking of himself.

Balian continued, "You've been a loyal brother, Aimery. Again and again. You backed Guy against your better judgment. You stayed by him on the Horns of Hattin, when you could have broken out with Tripoli or me. You went into captivity with him. You joined him at the siege of Acre. You supported him against Montferrat. And what did he ever give you in return? Nothing. Not one miserable thing. Why, in the name of our ever-loving Christ, should you respect his last wishes?"

"You sincerely think your nephew would back me?"

"For a barony? Henri would back John's dog!"

Suddenly they were all laughing, and although Aimery growled, "I'm not sure that's much of a compliment," his shoulders had squared, and Eschiva could feel the energy surging through his muscles again.

"Let's discuss this over dinner and wine," Maria Zoë suggested practically, with an eye on Eschiva.

The little monastery of St. Sebastian only had two guest chambers and most guests took their meals with the brothers in the refectory, but Ibelin asked for wine and food to be brought to his chamber, and John lugged the small table and both chairs from Aimery and Eschiva's chamber to his father's, then pulled up a chest for himself. The decision, however, had been made in the cloisters; all that remained was to discuss was details. Georgios quickly sent back to the *Storm Bird* to bring Magnussen as soon as he appeared, and Ibelin had the monks bring them papyrus, so Aimery and John could give him a better picture of the island, the situation, and what was at stake.

"There's a very long, narrow peninsula that extends to the east at

the end of the Pentadaktylos range. Then along the south coast are three large bays, each with a small port: Famagusta furthest east, then Larnaka, and finally Limassol—the only port that can be called anything more than a fishing village. The west of the island curves around to the north, with a small but ancient town facing due west, Paphos. Then there's a fairly sharp peninsula and two bays that face northwest, but are practically uninhabited because of the Troodos mountain range that sits here." Aimery thumped his hand over the western third of his self-drawn map.

"But Troodos has copper and, they say, silver. And there are salt fields near Larnaka and Limassol," John added eagerly. In his tone of voice Aimery heard confirmation that John had, despite everything, fallen in love with the island as much as he had.

"The forests are so dense, tall, and broad, you could build a thousand ships and hardly notice a tree had been felled," Aimery added.

"And the wine is as good as at Ibelin, Papa. Truly it is!" John's enthusiasm made his parents laugh.

Aimery continued with the geography lesson. "Beyond Morphou Bay here in the north there is a sharp peninsula pointing due north; after that the north coast is a long, straight line right to the tip of the Karpas peninsula. The Pentadaktylos comes down almost to the edge of the sea, so there is only a narrow, but incredibly fertile, coastal plain from here to about here, and there are two ports on the north coast, Kyrenia and Karpasia, of which Kyrenia has the smaller but better protected harbor."

"So, if you divided up the island based on the ports, much as we did here, you'd have baronies at Karpasia, Kyrenia, Paphos, Limassol, Larnaka, and Famagusta."

"And Salamis. I forgot that. It's here on the southern shore of the Karpas peninsula. Little more than ruins, really, but a lovely location. It could be revived."

"That would still leave you this enormous inland area as the royal domain—to be bestowed on worthy vassals at a later date."

"There's a problem, Balian," Aimery pointed out, sitting upright and glancing at Maria Zoë. "Only a king can make barons. Guy was King of Jerusalem, but he was only Lord of Cyprus."

"But Isaac Comnenus called himself 'Emperor,'" Maria Zoë pointed out.

"And everyone called him a usurper. Before that, Cyprus was only a province of the Eastern Roman Empire."

"So was Palestine," Balian reminded them. "All the states we have

established out here were mere provinces of the Eastern Empire before. All you need do is—"

A knock on the door interrupted them, and on their invitation Georgios entered, followed by a tall, sinewy man with a beak-like nose and blond hair streaked with grey that fell down to his shoulders. Ibelin jumped to his feet, and a moment later found himself in the short but powerful embrace of the Norse captain.

"Master Magnussen, I thought you said you were gone for good!" Ibelin exclaimed as he stepped back to get a better look at the Norseman.

"Stinking boring back in Western Ocean and the North Sea. Nothing doing but a little piracy—which, of course, I abjured long ago."

"I would have thought King Richard could have used your services in his war with King Philip."

"I tried, but for some reason he prefers English and Scottish crews. Besides, I thought I remembered the climate being better here. I'd forgotten it was an oven worse than hell in summer."

"Come, join us. Wine, or should I send for ale?"

"The ale here is lousy—I'd forgotten that, too—but still better than grape juice."

"Georgios?" Ibelin looked to his squire.

"Yes, my lord." The young man disappeared again.

"So, aside from missing my beautiful face, why did you want to see me, Ibelin?" The Norseman took a seat on the chest John vacated for him.

"You heard that Guy de Lusignan is dead and has named his brother Geoffrey his heir."

"That's what *this* Lusignan said," the Norseman replied, nodding his head to Aimery almost insultingly, but then softening the gesture by flinging a smile his way. Magnussen had always retained his independence, taking an oath to no man. He had worked closely with Ibelin—not the Lusignans. The latter had been "the enemy" during most of his stay in Outremer, and had it been Aimery rather than John who had asked for passage, he would probably have turned him down.

"Well, for a variety of reasons, we don't like that solution," Ibelin noted.

Magnussen grunted and waited, his eyes fixed on Ibelin.

"Geoffrey only campaigned briefly here; he's not as familiar with the situation, and despite his unquestioned courage, he did not make many friends."

"He'd sell his own mother to the devil if it suited him. Last I heard

he was thinking of betraying King Richard to Philip."

"What?" John asked, scandalized. After his father and Magnussen, King Richard was the man he admired most in the world.

Balian wasn't letting himself get distracted, however. He remarked firmly, "We think Aimery would make a better Lord of Cyprus."

Magnussen looked over at Aimery and then back at Ibelin with slightly raised eyebrows.

Ibelin didn't explain himself. He simply declared, "Aimery needs to return as soon as possible to establish his claim. It is important that he is well established and recognized before Geoffrey finds out he has been bequeathed a fabulous lordship," Ibelin explained, only to be taken aback by his wife contradicting him.

"I'm not so sure," she noted, earning a look of confusion from her husband and son, a scowl from Aimery, and a look of outrage from Eschiva. They all gaped at her, while Magnussen looked amused by her apparent rebellion. Maria Zoë answered their looks by pointing out, "Geoffrey returned to France because he didn't like Cyprus, remember?"

"Or he didn't like playing lieutenant to Guy!" Aimery countered, adding bitterly, "It's an unpleasant and thankless job, I can assure you. Geoffrey didn't have the temperament for it. Being lord in his own right is something else."

"Certainly, but Geoffrey will want to weigh his options," Maria Zoë insisted. "If he thinks he will be welcomed on Cyprus with rapturous relief by devoted followers that is one thing. If he knows he has been rejected by the men in control of the island and that he will have to fight his own brother for it that is something else again."

"Ah," Balian caught the drift of his wife's thoughts. "You're saying we *want* Geoffrey to find out that Aimery is staking his claim."

"Yes; it might help him make, shall we say, the *right* decision. In fact, I think the *sooner* he finds out, the better."

"I can see to that," Magnussen volunteered. "If you give me a day or two to purchase a cargo of spices, silk, or ivory, I can sail for Cyprus the day after, drop *this* Lusignan off, and continue back to Marseilles. There we'll spread the news in every tavern of the city that Aimery has been acclaimed Lord of Cyprus."

"At what price?" Balian asked evenly. He'd long since learned that Magnussen did most things merely for the sheer fun of it, or the challenge, but he always pretended to be mercenary. It was essential to negotiate a price up front.

"Well," Magnussen leaned forward to prop his elbows on the table. "Cyprus, as we see here, is an island, and its security, therefore, will

depend upon a fleet. I always fancied commanding a whole fleet—not of merchantmen, but of fighting ships. I want to be Admiral of Cyprus." He looked up and smiled straight at Aimery.

Aimery spluttered with indignation. "For one single voyage?"

Magnussen looked at Ibelin. "Was it only one?"

"It's a good deal, Aimery," Balian advised. "You were still in captivity when Magnussen almost single-handedly broke the Saracen blockade of Tyre. If he hadn't, Tyre would have been lost, but Montferrat never properly thanked him."

"That man got what he deserved. Almost made me like the Assassins," Magnussen observed. "Besides, if you don't take me, you'll end up being dependent on the Pisans or the Venetians or the Genoese, and *they* will cut your throat to sell you your own blood or sell you your own p—sorry, my ladies." He stopped himself with a bow of his upper body in the direction of Maria Zoë and Eschiva.

Aimery recognized that he was in no position to haggle. Of course, he could take passage with another ship, but the Norse snecka was one of the fleetest ships he'd ever seen, much less set foot upon, and the captain was an independent man beholden to no one. Furthermore, the Dowager Queen had a point: if the news reached Geoffrey that Cyprus wasn't really his before he'd had a chance to get accustomed to the idea of being Guy's heir, Geoffrey might prefer to stay in Poitou. He might opt to stake his fortune on playing off Capet against Plantagenet. It was a game Geoffrey understood well, and was likely to seem more certain of success than another adventure in Outremer.

Aimery signaled his consent by adding, "Be sure you also spread the word about how precarious the situation is. Stress that even the militant orders have been attacked and that no one is safe."

"Horrible place! Worse than Sicily!" Magnussen answered with a straight face. "Ship was nearly swamped by people desperate to escape the carnage. I wouldn't be surprised if all the Franks on the island are already dead—slaughtered in their beds."

The men laughed, leaving the monk delivering Magnussen's ale completely discomfited. How could good Christian men laugh about such a state of affairs?

Eschiva had hardly spoken over the meal. She was particularly intimidated by Magnussen, who seemed to her more a heathen Viking than a Christian captain. Mostly, however, she was still shaken by that moment in the courtyard when Aimery had turned his back on her. It didn't matter that his reason had been shame. In that single gesture, she had been confronted by her worst nightmare: divorce. Her father

had divorced her mother after twenty years of marriage. Eschiva had been married to Aimery for the same number of years.

Suddenly she realized why she had never made a fuss over Aimery's frequent affairs. In the deepest core of her being, she knew she could survive anything except being set aside, dismissed, discarded. Let him have his mistresses, as long as he didn't take from her the status of wife. For twenty years—nearly her entire conscious life—she had been Aimery de Lusignan's wife. It was who she was. Yes, she had been born an Ibelin and inwardly often sided with her uncle against her in-laws, but she was still Aimery de Lusignan's wife.

That moment in the courtyard had been all the worse for being so unexpected. Since Aimery's return from captivity five years ago, they had found new affection for one another. They had been like young lovers, as the child in her womb testified. Her hand fell automatically to her belly, feeling for the sign of life within. This past Christmas at Caymont had been the most beautiful interlude of her entire life. She had felt loved, respected, cherished, and content. Aimery had spent all his waking hours with her or the children. Indeed, he had lavished attention on the children as never before. Furthermore, although he had complained about his brother's policies, his love for Cyprus and hope of building a future there had shone through.

The door fell shut with a loud clunk, and Aimery shot the bolt. "You know," he started at once, not noticing his wife's fragile mood (as was so often the case), "it's risky, but Ibelin is right. We have nothing more to lose. The only thing I regret is, it means we'll be separated again for God knows how long."

"No."

"No?" Aimery looked around, baffled. He had unbuckled his sword and hung it over the bedpost, and was about to sit to remove his boots. "But, Eschiva! You heard the arguments. On Cyprus I have a chance, a real chance, of becoming a king in all but name—maybe in name, too, if we appeal to the Pope—"

"I didn't mean you shouldn't go, Aimery," Eschiva declared steadily. "I only meant I wouldn't let you go *alone*. I'm coming with you."

"Eschiva! You can't come now! Not in your condition!"

"What do you mean, 'in my condition'? I'm carrying your child, Aimery—a child whose future is at stake. A child who might one day be the ruler of Cyprus."

Aimery crossed the distance between them with two giant steps and put his hands on her shoulders. "Eschiva, Cyprus is—not safe."

"This has nothing to do with being *safe*. I don't *want* to be safe, if it means being separated. And, more important, if you are laying claim

to a kingdom, then you need to show your future barons that in choosing you they aren't choosing a single man, but a dynasty—a man with a wife, two sons already, and more on the way."

Aimery registered that Eschiva was making sense—as she almost always did when she ventured to voice an opinion. Before he had decided what to answer, Eschiva continued, "Nor does it hurt that I'm an Ibelin."

Aimery had thought of that already. Eschiva's father had been a respected nobleman; her uncle was nothing short of legendary. "I know," he admitted, "but you're in the seventh month. Do you think I've forgotten how frightened you are of childbirth? Do you think I don't understand what a chance you are taking already? I want you safe, and I want you to be among people you trust when the time comes."

Eschiva thought briefly of how earlier today she had made Isabella promise to be with her when the time came, and instantly recognized how unimportant that was compared to being with Aimery. She lifted her chin, looked Aimery straight in the eye, and declared: "And I'm telling you, Aimery, *you* are the only one I need to have near me. Any midwife can deliver the child, but I want you beside me when I hold *our* child in my arms for the first time. I want you beside me when we christen him in Nicosia, your future capital. I would rather give birth in a manager like the Virgin Mary than in a palace, if the former means you are with me."

Aimery pulled her into his arms and held her closely but gently, conscious of her big belly between them. "Eschiva, you are more precious to me than anything else on earth. How can I put you at risk?"

Eschiva rested her head on his chest with a sense of deep gratitude for his words, his presence, and his warmth, but she spoke firmly. "I'm at risk in childbed—no matter where I am. I could die just as easily at Caymont or in the royal palace at Acre. It's not as if you're going to the wilderness where there are no midwives, no physicians, no houses, baths, or churches." Eschiva had listened very well to his enthusiastic descriptions of Cyprus over Christmas. "Indeed, the way you described the royal palace in Nicosia, it was hardly less splendid than the Imperial palace in Constantinople where Maria Zoë grew up."

Aimery winced inwardly as he realized he was now trapped in a web of his own making. He was being repaid for his earlier eagerness to make her want to come, anticipating reluctance rather than this untimely zeal.

"And you said the physicians were highly trained, the sewage systems very modern, and the wine excellent," she recited further.

“God help me, Eschiva.” Aimery bent to seal her lips with a kiss to stop her saying any more. Then, pulling away, he admitted, “It is all true, but . . . ” He searched for an argument that would hold water. “I would feel happier knowing you are with Maria Zoë or Isabella. I’m going to have my hands full. I’m not going to be able to devote the time and attention to you I did at Christmas.”

“I understand that,” Eschiva told him bluntly. “I don’t expect you pay *me* attention. I’m coming to support you, not the other way around.” Taking a deep breath, Eschiva drew away from Aimery’s embrace and faced him. “Aimery, it doesn’t matter what you say. I’m going with you to Cyprus.”

For a moment more, Aimery tried to resist. He wanted to do what was right for her and their unborn child, but deep down inside, selfishly, he wanted her with him. He knew she would be a comfort to him, and a source of strength. Aimery pulled her back into his arms and laid his head on hers. “So be it then, sweetheart.”

Chapter Nine
Staking a Claim

Cyprus
June 1194

THE WIND GOT UP AFTER THEY had lost sight of the mainland. Eschiva at once started to feel queasy, and decided she should lie down. Although her hastily recruited handmaiden Anne was here to look after her, Aimery insisted on going below with her. This left John on deck alone and free to approach the crew.

John would never forget the first time he laid eyes on Haakon Magnussen. He and his father had gone to an armorer about repairs to a hauberk, and Magnussen had burst in with half his crew still bleeding and bruised from a brawl with the Marquis de Montferrat's men. In their old-fashioned leather armor, with axes as large as ox heads and long, flowing hair, the Norsemen had seemed like characters right out of a Viking saga. John had been entranced from the start, but his father had not been keen on him making a more intimate acquaintance with the Norsemen. John wasn't entirely sure why, since they were all good Christians. Even now, he noted, all the crew wore heavy wooden or bone crosses around their necks, most of which were elaborately carved.

"Either out of the way or give a hand!" Magnussen's voice bellowed from the afterdeck. "We're coming about!"

John looked back over his shoulder, saw men dividing up to unleash both corners of the sail, and went to join the men on the leeward side. He'd watched this maneuver on the outward voyage and thought he understood what was going on.

At a shout from Magnussen, the helmsman flung the tiller over with all his might. The sharp prow of the vessel swung into the wind. The great striped sail started to shiver, sag, then fill from the wrong side. The ship lost momentum, and the pitching of the deck became so pronounced that John found it hard to stand (although his companions seemed to have no problem). John glanced nervously over his shoulder toward the captain, awaiting the order to release the

sail and adjust it, but one of the men around him told him to relax. “We need to back around more,” he explained to John.

After what seemed like an eternity of wallowing, the order came. The man at the head of the rope released it, and they walked the end forward to make it fast as close to the bow as possible. John was conscious more of tagging along than of doing any good, but that earned him at least a grunt of thanks from one crewman and a smile from another. The latter was a youth who seemed about his own age and startled John by asking in Latin, “Want to learn seamanship, do you?”

“Well, I want to *understand* it better,” John corrected, asking back, “Where did you learn Latin?”

“My father sent me to a monastery to atone for his sins three years ago, but I ran away. It didn’t seem fair, *me* suffering for *his* sins. I couldn’t stand being cooped up all the time. I need the wind and sea.” He gestured vaguely toward the prow, which was again plowing the sea in a steady, purposeful manner. He had long blond hair, tied at the back of his neck by a leather thong, but the wind had freed many strands that now whipped around his face. John thought he looked magnificent.

“You’ll find most of Haakon’s crew are running away from something,” the youth flung at John with a smile, and then a wary glance toward his captain. “I’m Christian Arendsen, by the way,” he announced, holding out his hand. “Come. I’ll show you the ropes.” John followed eagerly.

By dusk John was utterly exhausted, and they hadn’t once had to man the oars. With the sunset, however, the wind died down, and they found themselves becalmed in the middle of nowhere. Aimery, Eschiva, and Anne came back on deck. Here they shared a meal of fresh-caught fish over an open grill in the fresh, cool air under the stars.

“It’s like being in the desert,” Eschiva remarked, looking around uneasily at the emptiness. “Not another living soul, no landmarks, nothing.” She wasn’t comfortable entrusting her life to the fragile structure that they called a ship, and she felt very lost and far from everything she knew. The magnitude of the risks they were taking crowded in on her.

“But there are fish to feed us,” Magnussen remarked, gesturing to the remnants of the grilled fish they had just finished off, “unlike in the desert. And we don’t have to drag ourselves through the heat, but can let the *Storm Bird* carry us forward even in our sleep.”

Eventually they settled themselves on some sheepskins with light cotton coverings. Aimery and John were soon asleep and snoring

softly, but Eschiva lay awake in Aimery's arms, reminding herself that she had asked for this and trying to ignore Anne's sniffling.

Anne was Constance d'Auber's daughter, the girl who had returned traumatized from Saracen captivity. Everyone had assumed that being home with family would enable her to bury the past, but she seemed unable to fully adjust. Queen Isabella, served by so many high-born ladies, had lost patience with her. Anne was so timid that she never looked anyone in the eye, mumbled when she spoke, frequently dropped things, and ran away from every responsibility. Her mother, sensing that Anne had become a liability, had asked Eschiva to take the girl with her as her handmaiden. Since Eschiva had no one else, she had readily agreed. Only now, listening to her sobs, did Eschiva realize no one had even thought to ask Anne if she *wanted* to come. Her tears gave a depressing answer. They also added to Eschiva's guilt at leaving her children behind without a goodbye.

Of course, the children would be fine at Caymont. It was the nearest thing they had ever had to a real home. Even before Hattin, the Constable's quarters in the Tower of David had been cramped. They'd been ejected from them by the Saracens only to go to the even more crowded accommodations in besieged Tyre. That had always been "temporary," just a place to stay until the Franks recaptured the Kingdom. After the Truce of Ramla they'd rented the little house in Acre, another residence with little space, and again they'd been expelled. Caymont was the first manor house her children had ever lived in, Eschiva reflected, and they all loved it there.

In the dark and silence of a ship at sea, however, Eschiva asked herself what would happen if things went wrong. What if the Frankish lords on Cyprus refused to support Aimery? What if they insisted on supporting Geoffrey? How would Aimery react? What if he blamed Uncle Balian for sending him to face such a humiliation—and by association blamed her? Surely he wouldn't, but . . . Her thoughts kept going in circles, until the wind came up again and the gentle hiss of the waves along the hull lulled her into a deep sleep.

They made landfall at Famagusta—but Aimery, remembering his reception there the previous year, insisted on sailing back to Gastria, where the Templars retained an austere castle. Although the distance from Gastria to Nicosia was greater, Aimery was acutely aware that the roads on Cyprus were not safe. He and John had relied on being fast and armed, but with Eschiva in his party he could not travel fast, and he wanted a stronger escort than he and John could offer.

John's friend from the crew grumbled about the decision. When John questioned why, he laughed and answered, "No taverns or wenches in Gastria. A bunch of stone-cold sober monks!" John felt a

little foolish for not being interested in “wenches,” while what he remembered of the taverns of Famagusta had not whetted his appetite for more.

Aimery was relieved to find that the Templar commander of Gastria was away. He was not at all sure the Templars would throw in their lot with him in his bid to become Lord of Cyprus. Everything would depend on the new Master of the Temple, Gilbert Erail. Aimery knew too little about the man to venture a guess at how he would react to rivalry between the Lusignan brothers.

With the commander away, however, a sergeant was in charge at Gastria. This semi-illiterate local man didn’t dream of challenging the former Constable of Jerusalem (or was it the brother of the late King Guy?). He at once agreed to provide an escort of eight sergeants, as well as a horse litter for Eschiva and Anne. So they took leave of Haakon Magnussen and his crew—who, after taking on water, put out to sea again.

After only one night in the austere guest quarters at Gastria (with the men strictly separated from the women), the little party set out. While Anne sat motionless with her shoulders hunched up and her head down, Eschiva kept the curtains pulled back to see as much of her new home as possible. The land here was flat and treeless, cultivated by peasants dressed in unbleached homespun kaftans and wearing head coverings of the same material. They were for the most part hoeing the fields of evidently rich but sun-baked earth, hacking at the caked soil in preparation for fall planting. There was no evidence of oxen or plow horses, just humans doing this back-breaking labor in the oppressive heat. Occasionally light breezes swept dust into tiny cyclones that shattered the shimmering heat, only to dissipate again in the already hazy air. The peasants spared the travelers only scant and wary glances.

The road itself was comparatively empty, although they passed several shepherds with sheep, goats, or a mixture of both moving their small flocks along the side of the road. More often they encountered women driving little donkeys laden with amphorae to and from the wells. The women were barefoot and kept their skirts hitched into their belts to avoid the dust, thereby exposing their ankles. They kept their heads covered by large white shawls wrapped around their shoulders, despite the heat. They kept their eyes down and averted for the most part, only rarely risking a glance at the strange women. At first Eschiva smiled and waved, but she was met with such consistent blank or hostile stares that she soon gave up.

The bank of purple mountains that had blocked the horizon to the

northwest gradually came closer. The mountain range was dramatic. It had tall, sharp peaks and was clothed in dense forests—something Eschiva had never seen before. The range ended dramatically in precipitous cliffs down to the fertile plain on which they were traveling. Aimery pointed out some white rocks and claimed there was a castle there. Eschiva could not make out what he was talking about. The top of the hill was sharp and ragged, not flattened to support a castle, and there were no rings of masonry anywhere.

"We'll spend the night there," Aimery assured her. "It's where your cousin Henri has his base of operations."

"He built a castle already?" Eschiva asked, astonished.

"Good heavens, no! It was built by the Greeks. Allegedly by the Dowager Queen's ancestor, Emperor Alexis I—or, shall we say, at his behest by the governor at the time."

Eschiva leaned out of the litter to try to see the castle again, but she could not for the life of her find it. All she could see were vertical limestone bluffs interrupted by crevices in which pines grew. She said nothing, however, for fear of Aimery's scorn. He would doubtless be disgusted that she couldn't see something as substantial as a castle.

In the afternoon they started to wind their way up the face of the mountain range, and soon the horses were toiling hard on the incline. Eschiva felt vaguely guilty, conscious that without her in a litter, her husband would have made much better time. He might even have been in Nicosia by now, she supposed. It was also decidedly uncomfortable in a horse litter on a steep hill. Had she not been so heavily pregnant, she would have preferred to walk. As it was, she and Anne sat facing backward so that they did not have to lean forward the whole time.

As the sun slid down the sky, Aimery sent one of the Templars ahead to Kantara to warn Henri de Brie that they were on their way. This proved a wise precaution, as the forest was getting denser and they were having increasing difficulty finding their way on narrow trails that sometimes twisted back on themselves or just petered out.

Suddenly a half-dozen knights burst out of the forest to their right and surrounded them. After a moment of alarm, Eschiva was relieved to see her cousin Henri at the head of the party. He greeted Aimery curtly, and then rode straight over to the litter and bent down from his horse. "Dearest cousin! This is no place for a lady! Much less a pregnant one," he told her bluntly. "I've ordered the most habitable tower made ready for you, but in this thing"—he looked contemptuously at the litter—"you're at least an hour away from Kantara. Do you have anything warm with you? When the sun goes down, it gets chilly up here."

“Yes, I have a shawl, thank you, Henri. I *do* so appreciate your hospitality, cousin.”

She had succeeded in making him feel rude, and he caught his breath, paused, and looked at her again. Their eyes met. Eschiva was reminded of all the horror stories that had circulated about him. He had taken part in Reynald de Châtillon’s Red Sea Raids, plundering, burning, slaughtering, and whoring all the way to Aden and back. Rumors had circulated that he’d kept a half-dozen women as his sex slaves and had tortured prisoners to make them reveal their treasure to him. But Uncle Balian told her not to believe everything she heard.

. . .

“We’ll talk in Kantara,” he answered, sat up straighter, and started giving orders.

They were being led by men carrying torches by the time they finally made it to the outer works of the castle, which abruptly reared up out of nowhere. These consisted of two very tall towers of white limestone blocks flanking a narrow wall, rather than a perimeter wall as at every other castle Eschiva had ever seen. The castle itself loomed above them atop a slope so steep she had to tip her head all the way back to see the walls. She might not have seen them at all if men with torches had not been moving back and forth along them in apparent agitation.

Aimery came to help her out of the litter and announce that she would have to walk the rest of the way. The stables were here and the path was too steep for horses. Eschiva said nothing, only helped Anne, who was now trembling from fear or cold or both, out of the litter. She put an arm around the girl’s shoulders to comfort her, and to give herself something to lean on. Then Aimery seemed to remember himself. He came back, took her arm, and started leading her up the narrow path that zigzagged up the face of the mountain. Anne was left to trail behind them like a lost puppy.

Eschiva didn’t understand a great deal about military architecture, but even she felt as if she were trapped in a killing field. Behind them was the barbican, and on both flanks there were towers, even more massive than those of the barbican. These protruded forward from the cliff ahead of them on bedrock ledges. Straight ahead, but a good hundred feet higher than where they dismounted, was a tall, crenelated wall. In short, from all sides the dark, windowless walls loomed up, crowding in on her. If those walls had been manned by hostile men, they could have been slaughtered from four directions. Any unfriendly force trying to storm the arched gate into the still-invisible castle would be subjected to murderous fire—all the while struggling up a steep and uneven slope.

The surprise beyond the gate was almost as great. There *was* no castle inside the wall: just buildings scattered among the rugged outcroppings of limestone and the pine trees. The wall itself, however, was four yards deep, with batteries of vaulted chambers honeycombing the backside and spilling light into the interior space, which was far too rugged and overgrown to be called a courtyard.

"This is a military camp, my lady," one of her cousin's knights remarked, seeing her expression, "not a residence."

"We're on our way to Nicosia," Aimery answered for her. "We only ask your lord's hospitality for the night."

"And you have received it," Henri answered, looming up behind them. "Come."

He led them along a rough stone path that wound its way through the scrub brush. By the way it caught at Eschiva's skirts, tearing them when she tried to free them, she realized they were thorns. A singularly inhospitable garden, she thought.

At last they reached a rectangular tower topped with crenelation. Entering through the arched door, they found themselves in a spacious chamber paved with mosaics under a soaring cross-vaulted ceiling. The tower was actually divided into two rooms, both with fireplaces, although a small and smoking fire had been lit in only one. An interior stone stairway led up to the floor above. By the light of the struggling fire and the torches held by their escort, Eschiva could make out sparse, crude furnishings that appeared to have been taken from peasant huts. Yet in addition to the mosaic flooring, she could faintly see the hint of wall murals. Once upon a time, she surmised, this had been an elegant and magnificently appointed chamber fit for the chatelaine of the castle—or at least the Emperor of the Eastern Empire's deputy on the island.

"This is a command center, Eschiva," her cousin intoned, echoing his knight's comment, "not a lady's chamber. There's a bed on the floor above that we'll make up for you and Aimery. John and your woman can bed down here. I'll also have some lamps, a meal, and a chamber pot brought for you, so you don't have to use the garrison latrines."

"Thank you, Henri, I appreciate that. I hope you will join us for the meal?"

"I can't *wait* to hear what you are doing here in your condition," Henri answered, and then with a brief bow withdrew.

There was an awkward silence in the tower chamber as the footsteps, voices, and torchlight from Sir Henri and his men retreated. Then Aimery started to defend himself: "I warned you! I told you—"

“Aimery,” Eschiva interrupted him. “I don’t mind. But I would like that chamber pot, and I expect poor Anne needs one, too. I would also like to sit down.” She looked around at the three-legged wooden stools, and chose a chest with a broken foot instead. She eased herself carefully onto its slightly sloping top, a hand on her belly.

“Are you all right?” Aimery asked in alarm, his anger already dissipated by her calm.

“Yes, Aimery, I’m just tired.”

“I’ll go see about the chamber pots and some lamps,” John volunteered, uneasy about the situation and not sure if Eschiva was really as calm as she appeared. Although he’d been to Kantara before, it was only tonight, with a lady present, that he registered just *how* Spartan the accommodations were. He was sure Aimery had promised her the palace at Nicosia, not this barren fortress, when he’d induced her to return to Cyprus with him.

John first made his way to the latrines and then worked his way back through the dark to the large tower beside the main gate, which his cousin and his knights occupied. Here the sergeant cook loaded him down with a chamber pot, a pair of crude pottery oil lamps, a loaf of unleavened bread along with a bread knife, and a crock full of lard.

Returning to the tower, John found Anne crouching beside the fire holding her shoulders, while Aimery and Eschiva spoke in low tones in the dark of the adjoining room. “Dinner!” he announced as cheerfully as he could, hoping to dispel any lingering tension.

Aimery and Eschiva at once broke off their conversation and returned to the lighted room. John set the bread and lard on the chest, handed the chamber pot to Eschiva, and went over to the fire to light the wicks of the lamps. Anne at once drew back into the shadows as if afraid of him. John tossed her a reassuring smile, but she only looked down, ashamed to meet his eyes. John felt sorry for her, but there was no time to try to win her over.

With a loud knock, his cousin Henri was back. He’d removed his helmet and was carrying a pottery pitcher in both hands. He clunked these down on the chest beside the bread, declaring, “Well water, and local wine. Oh, we need some goblets, spoons, and bowls. Stew’s on its way.” He was gone again, but returned shortly with the missing items. He then looked around the room critically and decided they needed a chair or two.

Two men-at-arms manhandled two chairs into the chamber a few moments later, and a third brought a deep cauldron filled with a surprisingly savory-smelling stew. “Local hare,” Henri announced as he personally scraped the bottom with the ladle and emptied a large portion into a bowl, which he handed to Eschiva. There were carrots

and leeks as well, all flavored with rosemary, bay leaf, and black pepper. John dutifully served Eschiva and Aimery wine and bread as they sat before the fire, and even took a bowl over to Anne before he sat on the chest and shoveled the stew down between bites of bread. He was absolutely famished.

Not until the leftovers had been carted away by John and Henri's own squire and a second pitcher of wine brought did Henri sit down on one of the stools facing his guests and open the conversation that had been hanging over them all. "So what is this all about, Aimery?" Henri asked bluntly. "First you just disappear, leaving the rest of us to bury your brother, and now you're back with a pregnant wife?"

"Did you bury Guy?" Aimery deflected the question. "I thought he asked to be buried in Acre."

"He did. Which would have entailed embalming his corpse and then, of course, petitioning the Archbishop of Acre for permission to bury him in Holy Cross Cathedral. We opted to bury him in the Templar church at Limassol instead."

Aimery nodded. That was good news. If they were willing to ignore Guy's last wishes in something as personal as his place of burial, they were likely to ignore his choice of successor as well.

"Of course, if you'd been here, we would have respected your wishes, Aimery. He was your brother, after all. We couldn't imagine where you were off to all of a sudden—unless it was flying off to France to offer your sword and services to your beloved brother Geoffrey." Henri sounded very cynical as his eyes bored into Aimery.

"I have no intention of serving my brother Geoffrey," Aimery answered bluntly.

"Meaning?"

"I don't think Geoffrey has earned an inch of Cyprus—much less all of it. Do you?" He sounded more defiant and self-assured than he really was.

"No, not particularly," Henri answered so reasonably that Aimery wondered if he had already guessed what they were about.

"And the others?" Aimery asked next.

"Barlais backs Geoffrey, of course. Bethsan and Toron think we should respect Guy's wishes. The English think Cyprus has reverted to the English Crown and want to consult with King Richard."

Aimery snorted in disgust, and Henri agreed: "My sentiments exactly."

"And Cheneché? Yourself?"

"Let's just put it this way: We didn't come here to enrich someone

else."

"I'll make you a baron, Henri. I'll make you all barons. If you back me." Aimery hadn't intended to blurt it out like that, and the look of alarm on Eschiva's face made him think he'd blundered. He wished, in that moment, that he had Ibelin's skills of persuasion—or better yet, that Ibelin were with him now. But he wasn't, and now that he'd said it out loud there was no taking it back. He waited.

Henri was staring at him with narrowed eyes. After a tense moment he remarked in a cautious tone, "You and I haven't always seen eye to eye."

"Is there anyone you see eye to eye with *all* the time?" Aimery asked back.

"The devil, maybe—or that's likely what the semi-sainted Balian d'Ibelin would probably say." Henri turned to throw this remark pointedly at John.

John bit his tongue to stop himself from blurting out what his father *had* said: that Henri would follow even a dog for the sake of a barony. Fortunately, his cousin had turned back to Aimery to complain: "You have spent almost every day you've been out here trying to rein me in, to stop me from doing what I do best—spreading terror."

"Has it gotten you what you wanted?" Aimery countered.

Henri didn't answer. The tension grew. Aimery kept trying to think of something to say, but his thoughts were racing in circles. Balian had been so certain Henri would back him over Geoffrey—and yet here he was, just staring at him. Aimery opened his mouth, and then thought better of it. He needed some fresh air to clear his brain out. "I need to go to the latrines," he announced abruptly. "Wait for me." He stood and exited.

Eschiva had been racking her brain trying to figure out how she could contrive a moment alone with her cousin. Now it was abruptly here, and she pounced. "Now that we are among ourselves, let me speak plainly," she burst out.

Henri looked over at her, surprised. He was not used to this cousin speaking her mind, at least not on matters of policy, nor did he entirely know what she meant by "among ourselves." Except for the girl, they were only family, anyway. And then it hit him: with Aimery temporarily out of the room, they were all *Ibelins*.

Eschiva knew she had only a few short minutes and could not afford an indirect approach. "Back my husband now, Henri, and no one will benefit more than you. Not because I or even my husband will reward you, but simply because if you do you will be the kin of the *next* Lord of Cyprus. If you back Geoffrey, on the other hand, you'll see the

island flooded with his Poitevin friends and *his* wife's relatives. Support Aimery—and my son, who is even now growing up with yours, will one day rule."

The sound of Aimery returning put an end to her short speech. Eschiva ended with a faint smile under eyes that were deadly serious. Then she looked down at her hands as Aimery entered and pretended she had said nothing at all.

Aimery hardly noticed as he launched into his own new argument. "Henri, you've known me for decades. You know I'm a reasonable man. We may disagree on tactics from time to time, but on the whole we have agreed on more than we have fought over—including our assessment of my recently deceased brother. May God have mercy on his soul."

"Indeed," Henri answered, getting to his feet with a significant glance at Eschiva as he announced, "I'll think about it. Now your lady needs some rest." He bowed to Eschiva gallantly, then nodded curtly to Aimery and John before striding out.

They sat in silence, listening to his retreating footsteps. It had not been an auspicious start. Aimery was seized with a sense of helpless rage that he dared not voice, while Eschiva didn't know if she should offer comfort or pretend she didn't recognize the gravity of the situation. If they couldn't win over even her cousin . . . But he had said he would think about it, she told herself. It would be wrong to despair already. With a sigh she stood, took an oil lamp, and beckoned to Anne. Together they passed into the darkened room and slowly mounted the stairs to the room on the floor above.

There was not a single stick of furniture here except the bed and the chamber pot. The windows were neither glazed nor shuttered and let in the brilliant darkness of the star-studded sky. It was as beautiful here as it had been at sea, Eschiva thought, but a chill seemed to cling to the walls, and she hurried to remove her surcoat, shoes, and stockings so she could slip into bed in her shift. The rough woolen blankets smelled vaguely rank, and she wondered who had used them last and where she might find a bath. Then, exhausted beyond even worrying, she fell asleep.

She awoke disoriented in the same chamber, utterly alone. She remembered Aimery being with her in the night, but he was not here now. Sitting up and looking around, she noted that here, too, the walls had traces of murals on what plaster remained. The plaster was cracked and chipped and much had fallen away, revealing the naked stones underneath. The sun pouring in the end window was brilliant, however, and warmth came in with it, chasing away the chill of the

night before.

Eschiva threw back the blankets and pushed her stiff and heavy body upright. She needed that chamber pot, and she needed to wash: if not a proper bath, at least some warm water to sponge off the worst dirt. Furthermore, her hair hadn't felt a comb since leaving the Templar commandery. Where on earth was Anne?

"Anne?" she called out in the direction of the stairs, and was answered by the sound of scurrying feet. Apparently the girl had only been waiting to be summoned. She appeared at the top of the stairs, head down, hair a ragged, unkempt mess, skirts and hands dirty with soot from the fire downstairs. She bobbed a curtsy but said nothing.

"Anne, where's my lord husband?"

"Dunno, m'lady," Anne answered, face down.

"Can you find us some wash water? There must be a well somewhere."

Anne turned and fled down the stairs again. With a sigh, Eschiva used the chamber pot, and then noticed there was another stairway in the corner of this chamber.

She went to it and peered upwards. It climbed inside the thickness of the walls to the roof above, and sunlight was pouring down it. She couldn't resist. Taking a fistful of skirts in her left hand and putting her other hand on the outer wall, she started up the stairs to the top. As she stepped out onto the roof, the splendor spread out before her took her breath away. She had a view down a steep, forested cliff to a stripe of brilliant green coastline outlined by the white of breaking waves. Beyond, a brilliant and glittering blue sea spread out to infinity. To her left, layers of purple mountains tumbled in echelon down to the sea. To her right, a patchwork of green, yellow, and brownish fields stretched outwards like a broad finger flanked on both sides by water. It was, she thought, the most beautiful sight she had ever seen in her life. No wonder Aimery was in love with the place!

Eschiva walked slowly around the roof of the tower, feasting on the changing panorama as her point of view shifted and the imperfect overcast blowing across the sun changed the patterns of sunlight on the sea. To the north the sea was so close she could make out the lines of breakers as they approached the shore and the whitecaps farther out. To the south, on the other hand, the sea only shimmered silver in the distance. The fertile peninsula to the east was pinched by the water until it became smaller and smaller, but it was richly cultivated. Along the near shore to the north, Eschiva could discern villages dotted along the coast, often with orchards around them. There were small, gentle bays, dotted with bobbing fishing boats and a larger roundship off the coast, heeling over in the wind.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” a male voice said behind her, and it wasn’t Aimery. It was her cousin Henri.

Eschiva started and spun around, flushing violently. She was wearing nothing but her shift, and the wind up here was blowing it about her wildly. Her hair, too, was uncovered and fluttering in the wind. She felt practically naked, and the look in Henri’s eye and his crooked smile suggested he was seeing more than he should.

Strangely, he looked as if he liked what he saw. This was confirmed by his next remark. “Not more beautiful than you, perhaps, but you already belong to someone else. Karpas, on the other hand, might be mine.” He strode to the edge of the parapet and stood looking due east with hungry eyes. “That,” he continued, pointing to the peninsula that gradually narrowed as it disappeared into the distance, “is Karpas.”

He turned, his eyes narrowed on either side of a nose that hung down from his forehead like the nose guard of a helmet. “Karpas is my price, Eschiva. Tell your husband he can have my backing—up to the hilt—if he gives me Karpas. And Kantara.” As he said the latter word, his gaze shifted from the distance to the immediate surroundings, the buildings scattered apparently haphazardly between the rocks and gullies that formed the crest of the sharp, narrow mountain.

Eschiva followed his gaze and then looked back at him. Their eyes met. She sensed that this was a very steep price—rather like Haakon Magnussen expected to be named Admiral. She was certain that Aimery would resist. He would protest. Just as he had about Magnussen. Aimery had never had enough money (or titles) to throw around. He had learned frugality the hard way, and he would find it hard to be generous. But Eschiva also knew that her Uncle Balian was right: they had to give the island away if they were ever going to hold it. She nodded, adding cautiously, “I will tell my lord husband.”

Her cousin nodded without breaking eye contact. “Tell him. And tell him it is non-negotiable. Karpas and Kantara, or I will throw my lot in with Geoffrey.”

Then Brie ducked down into the stairwell again and left her alone with the splendor that had enchanted not only Aimery de Lusignan, but the hardhearted Red Sea Raider as well.

Nicosia, Cyprus, July 1194

Aimery had not exaggerated in describing the “imperial” palace. It was as beautiful and well-appointed as he had claimed. It had taken

days for Eschiva to explore it all, and a week or more before she no longer got lost in its maze of courtyards and corridors. The gold mosaics, the blue, turquoise, and aqua-colored tiles, the marble fountains, and the potted hibiscus all reminded Eschiva of the stories Maria Zoë told of her childhood in Constantinople. Yet, despite—or was it because of?—its unquestioned luxury and beauty, the "imperial" palace of Nicosia was a frightening place to Eschiva. For one thing, her brother-in-law Guy had died in the very bed she shared with Aimery, and for another, she felt trapped in a strange dream. Around her was magnificent luxury, yet when she reached out for it, it seemed to recede.

It was just the language barrier, she told herself. All the servants in this beautiful palace were Greek-speaking, and they did not understand even simple requests. Or was it that they *did* understand but *pretended* not to?

Eschiva's attempts to get a meal ordered, a bed made up, or furniture moved, much less a message to her traveling husband, ended in blank stares and shaking heads. She hadn't been so conscious of the lack of understanding around her as long as Aimery had been with her, because John was their constant interpreter. But Aimery had been gone for ten days now, trying to win over others for his cause. The longer he was away, the more the palace around her seemed hostile. The servants seemed to grow scarcer, their looks more antagonistic, their whispering more conspiratorial.

Or was it all in her imagination? Eschiva put her hand to her belly. The child was very heavy now, but like the palace, he seemed unnaturally still. Her instincts said that wasn't good, but when she'd tried to ask for a midwife, the women gave her blank, uncomprehending stares and shook their heads. She'd tried to get Anne to go out into the city to locate a woman from one of the Italian merchant communes, hoping to ask about a midwife, but Anne had looked at her in sheer terror and then run away for half a day.

If she'd been feeling better herself, Eschiva would have ventured out into the streets on her own, but she wasn't feeling well. She was having repeated dizzy spells that left her queasy at best. Once or twice she almost blacked out. This wasn't normal. She knew it wasn't normal.

Guy had sickened and died in this palace. His insides had rotted. Or had he been poisoned?

John was starving (nothing unusual for him), and in his eagerness for some “real food” he turned Centurion over to the palace grooms. He took the steps to the second floor two at a time, thinking he was surely in time for dinner, and confident that his cousin would have organized the kitchens by now. Women were good at that.

“Eschiva?” he called out as he reached the royal tract, bewildered by the stillness around him. Things had never been this quiet before. When Guy lived here, the corridors had always been filled with petitioners and servants, hangers-on, and salesmen. “Eschiva?”

Something crashed loudly in the room to his right and he started, drew up, and looked toward the sound. “Eschiva?”

Anne darted out of the room from which the noise had come, saw him, and turned around to run back in. Alarmed, John followed her. Eschiva was standing upright behind a chair, pale as a ghost. A toppled table spilling broken crockery lay between her and the door. Her giant eyes met his. “John? Is Aimery back?”

“No, not yet. He—he sent me ahead. He should be here by evening,” John stammered as his heart beat in his chest. His cousin didn’t look at all well.

“John,” she started. “You must help me.”

“Of course. How?” He skirted the broken things while Barry happily started lapping up something, confident that anything on the floor was his.

As John reached Eschiva, she was swaying on her feet. “I need a midwife—or a doctor,” Eschiva told him, grasping his arm to hold herself upright.

“I know a doctor!” John announced, relieved that this was a task he could fulfill.

“Thank God for that, John,” she smiled at him wanly. “You must fetch him before Aimery gets back. Go for him now!”

Andreas Katzouroubis did not consider pregnancy his specialty. Indeed, he had had very little to do with it, preferring to leave it to those better trained and inherently more knowledgeable: the midwives. On the other hand, he could not refuse a summons from the palace, and he could not suppress his curiosity about the new despot’s wife, either. He was also considerably less worried about unpleasant consequences, having survived this long already. So he dutifully donned his robes and followed the Greek-speaking squire to the familiar apartments of the despot.

Here he was surprised to find himself confronted by a middle-aged woman with pleasant features who was not in the least haughty or

proud, but for all her dignity and restrained demeanor, desperately frightened. Andreas did his best to dispel her fears, assuring her that dizzy spells could be caused simply by the child in the womb sucking up more blood. “Perfectly normal,” he repeated blithely, without having a clue of whether it was true or not. He next advised her to rest as much as possible. “There’s no harm in spending the last couple of weeks in a sedentary state,” he told her in his best doctor’s voice before asking, “Do you have no relatives with you?” As he spoke he looked around, surprised at the empty room. Women nearing childbed were usually surrounded by a bevy of clucking female relatives.

Eschiva shook her head solemnly.

“And no handmaidens?”

“Only Anne.” Eschiva looked around for the girl, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Hmm,” Katzouroubis remarked, displeased. “I will send a midwife to you,” he concluded. “Are you having any pain?”

Eschiva shook her head, adding anxiously, “But the baby’s so still.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Katzouroubis assured her again with a dismissive gesture. “Just take it easy, and get plenty of sleep. Do you want a sleeping potion?”

Eschiva shook her head.

“Good; then there’s nothing more I can do for you. You can send for me if you feel the need, but it would be better to send for the midwife,” he admitted professionally. Then he packed his bag and departed without even requesting a urine sample.

When he was gone, John knocked hesitantly on the door, and poked his head around. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

“The doctor thinks so,” Eschiva answered hesitantly. She was, however, biting her lower lip, something John had seen his sister Isabella do when she was uncertain.

“Don’t you believe him?” John asked, coming into the room.

“I don’t know what to think, John,” Eschiva admitted, and she looked at him with huge eyes in her pale face. “I think something’s wrong. I’ve never been this dizzy before, almost blacking out. And the baby isn’t kicking anymore. But I can’t admit that to Aimery! He *told* me not to come. He *said* it was too dangerous. *I* was the one who insisted on coming—and now, if something goes wrong, it will be my fault. Aimery will never forgive me if I miscarry this child, or if it’s born deformed. It would be such a terrible omen, a curse upon the entire dynasty he is determined to establish.” It was all spilling out of her, because for over a week she’d had no one to speak to at all. Normally it would not have occurred to her to confide in a fifteen-

year-old boy.

John sensed that this was a much worse problem than he could handle. Eschiva sounded so *afraid* of Lord Aimery—and he didn't understand that, because in his experience Lord Aimery could be caustic, sarcastic, and short-tempered, but never unkind, cruel, or unjust. It didn't help that Lord Aimery was due by nightfall and the sun was already very low in the sky.

As if reading his thoughts, Eschiva drew a deep breath and sat up straighter. "Find Anne, will you, John? I need to fix myself up for Aimery. And then see if you can explain to someone in the kitchens that we need to make a proper meal. They don't understand me." Her frustration was reflected in her voice.

John nodded. "Yes, of course, I can take care of that, but—" John couldn't just carry on as if Eschiva were fine. She obviously wasn't; whether it was physical or just in her head didn't matter.

"Aimery mustn't know I'm so worried, John," Eschiva insisted, sensing his hesitation. "Promise you won't tell him."

John frowned. He thought Lord Aimery ought to know.

"Please!" Eschiva begged. "I couldn't bear it if he sent me away!"

John was rescued by the sound of horses, men, and Barry's barking as he ran joyfully down the corridor to greet his second master; Lord Aimery had just arrived in the street out front. John immediately announced, "I'll go down to the kitchens and send Anne to you—she's just out here!" Then he ducked out of the room without making any promises.

John intercepted Aimery on the stairs as he came pounding up them eagerly. Aimery had been more successful than expected, and he looked forward to telling Eschiva all about it.

"My lord!" John put himself in Aimery's way.

"John, go down and check on the horses; I don't trust the grooms here. And find out what's for dinner; I'm starved. Bring some wine back with you."

"Yes, my lord, but first—"

Aimery had started up the stairs again, and he turned his head to scowl back at his squire.

John stood his ground. "My lord, Lady Eschiva is not well. She asked me to fetch a physician, but she doesn't want you to know—because, you see, she's afraid something is wrong with her baby."

Aimery froze. His breath froze in his chest. All thought froze in his head. He stared at John.

"My lord, I think I should go for my mother. I think it would be

better if she were here."

"Your mother? The Dowager Queen?" Aimery asked, still dazed by John's blunt announcement. Part of him was thinking: *I knew this would happen. I warned her not to come.* And part of him was feeling overwhelmed by guilt for not having insisted that she remain in Caymont. Another part was just denying everything, saying she'd been fine when he left ten days ago.

John was still talking, trying to explain his thinking, but it was difficult because it had less to do with thought than instinct. He understood the fear he'd seen in Eschiva's eyes, and he also knew he couldn't put what he'd seen into words on a piece of parchment. "I was thinking, my lord," he stammered out, "that if I went to my mother and told her personally—"

"Look, John, if you want to go home, just tell me! You don't have to make up excuses!" Aimery snapped, trying to convince himself that John had made up everything about his wife feeling ill as an excuse to go home.

"I don't *want* to go home," John countered, with a stubborn expression Aimery had come to know well in the last eighteen months. "Well, not to stay," John modified his statement, adding, "I mean it, my lord. I think my mother should come. She speaks Greek. She's a Comnena. And Eschiva trusts her."

Aimery looked into his squire's eyes and saw nothing but sincerity in them. John genuinely cared about Eschiva, and he wasn't making this up.

"We were going to seek out Richard of Camville next," John spoke up, trying to anticipate Aimery's next objection. "You could ask Dick to serve as your squire while I go to Caymont. You could use two squires, anyway, and there's nothing wrong with Dick." John defended his friend, knowing that only Guy's treatment had made him seem so timid.

Aimery nodded absently. He wasn't worried about himself. He was worried about Eschiva. "Do you really think your mother would come?"

"Yes," John insisted, knowing he was overstating his own confidence. But his mother loved Eschiva almost as much as she loved her own children. Surely if she knew Eschiva was so afraid . . .

Aimery turned away from John to look up the stairs, and at that moment Eschiva emerged from the shadows of the gallery. She had put on one of her best gowns and a silk scarf the color of coral. It was usually one of her most flattering scarves, but (warned by John) Aimery saw the pallor of her cheeks and the dark circles under her

eyes. His heart twisted in his chest. Eschiva had a terror of childbirth. She should not have to face it here among strangers, no matter what she had said to him in Acre a month ago.

Aimery smiled and continued up the steps to take his wife gently in his arms, very conscious of the belly between them. He bent and brushed his lips on her forehead, and then stood back to smile at her. “Thornton’s with us, sweetheart. He agrees the King of England has no more interest in Cyprus. Tomorrow John and I will go to Camville—”

“So soon?” Eschiva seemed to stagger, almost fall.

Aimery caught her firmly. “We must go as soon as possible so Dick can serve me while John goes to Caymont.”

Eschiva looked over at John, bewildered, hurt, and reproachful. “You’re leaving us? But—”

“Only to get my mother,” John assured her. “I’ll bring her back in time to be with you.”

“Tante Marie?” Eschiva’s face brightened at once, “Do you think she’d come, John?”

The hope that lit up Eschiva’s eyes was enough to shatter the last doubts Aimery had about this scheme. If the mere mention of Maria Zoë was enough to bring some color back to Eschiva’s cheeks, then her presence would surely be enough to help her through the coming ordeal. He glanced back at John with a wink and a smile, and John grinned with relief.

Chapter Ten
Call of Kin

Caymont
Early August 1194

MARIA ZOË'S DREAM TURNED ABRUPTLY ALARMING. The banal, wandering plot, having something to do with planting carob trees that were yielding figs, suddenly became threatening. An ill-defined "evil" was trying to climb over the wall of her garden, causing the dogs to crawl away on their bellies rather than bark. A bloody hand took hold of the top of the wall—

Maria Zoë shook herself awake so sharply that she almost woke Balian. Then she lay in the dark, listening to the beating of her heart and trying to calm herself. It was just another nightmare. She'd had many since coming to Caymont. The dead were not at rest. Somewhere, she was certain, the remains of Christians still lay in unconsecrated ground. Until they were properly buried and Masses could be said for their souls—

She sat bolt upright in bed, realizing that she was wide awake and that the barking and shouting were real. "Balian! There's something going on!"

Balian groaned, stirred, and then tensed, hearing what she had heard. "There's someone at the gate," he concluded.

"It's the middle of the night," Maria Zoë protested.

Balian, who had been sleeping on his belly, pushed himself up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed in an easy, fluid motion. Naked, he stepped down from the bed platform and crossed to the window. He opened the shutter and peered out into the night, but could see nothing. This window did not give a clear view of the courtyard gate anyway, but the night was dark. "No torches," he announced. "I'll go see what it's about." He turned back into the room and started pulling on his shirt and braies.

Maria Zoë slipped out of bed. Unlike her husband, she did not sleep naked. In her nightgown she went to the door and, opening it, called into the anteroom to her husband's squire. "Georgios! Come help my

lord dress."

Georgios dutifully roused himself from his straw pallet and stumbled into the chamber to help Balian into his hose and gambeson. He hadn't quite finished before a loud pounding at the outer door interrupted them. An excited voice shouted through the wood: "My lord! Lord John is here!"

"John?" Maria Zoë asked, and crossed the anteroom with hurried steps to open the outer door herself.

A young sergeant stood on the landing. He hadn't expected to be confronted by the Dowager Queen of Jerusalem wearing nothing but her nightgown, and he flushed in embarrassment as he stammered, "Uh, yes, my lady, Lord John is here."

Balian came up behind his wife, buckling on his sword. "Alone?"

The sergeant gratefully directed his gaze at his lord. "Except for his dog and his lame horse. He said something about being thrown. . . ."

"I wasn't *thrown*," John's voice protested out of the darkness of the stairwell. "Centurion shied and landed on uneven ground. He lost his footing, and we both went down." With a nod to his lord and lady, the sergeant made way for the heir of the house. John emerged, limping. His parents backed up into the chamber, taking in the caked mud on his shoulder, hip, and down the side of his leg. The side of his face was bruised, too, and his hose badly torn and bloody at the knee. "I would have made it before sundown if that hadn't happened, but Centurion came up so lame I couldn't ride. I think he's torn a tendon, or maybe it's a twisted pastern. He won't put any weight on his right foreleg—"

"We'll look after Centurion in due time," his father interrupted. "First, sit down and tell us what you're doing here." He took hold of his son's arm and pulled him into the anteroom, guiding him toward one of the chests.

Maria Zoë sent Georgios for water and vinegar to wash John up, while John continued talking about the accident. "Everything had gone so well until then," he explained, as if someone were accusing him of being irresponsible. "I didn't even get cheated by the Genoese, because Haakon told me what to watch for, and what the going rates for passage are. The Genoese galley couldn't sail anywhere near as close to the wind as the *Storm Bird*," he added, showing off his newly learned seamanship, "but we still would have made Acre in two days if we hadn't been forced to run from a Pisan corsair that hove into sight just ten nautical miles off Bodrum. We ran before the wind to get away from her, and had to beat back to windward after we'd shaken her off. It was quite rough, too. I think Centurion didn't have his land legs yet. I mean, it's not like him—"

"John." His father's voice was soft, but firm and commanding. "Why are you here?"

Rather than answering his father, John turned to look at his mother. "It's because of Eschiva," he said earnestly. "She's—she's frightened. The doctor said everything was all right, but she—she just doesn't trust him. Or, I don't mean she doesn't trust *him*, it's just that she's alone, among strangers." The words were tumbling out in an excited rush. "Lord Aimery and I have been away a lot. We had to go to all the Frankish lords to put our case to them" (his mother noted that he called it "our" case, identifying with Aimery de Lusignan), "and they are scattered across the island. Eschiva was alone—you can't count Anne. She's more frightened than a sparrow and hardly ever says a word. Sometimes I get the feeling she's not right in the head." Maria Zoë sometimes had that feeling, too, but who could blame her after what she'd been through? She nodded.

John continued. "But no matter what the doctor says, Eschiva's convinced there's something wrong with the child, and—"

"Did she say what exactly?" his mother interrupted him.

John shrugged uncomfortably. "No, not really. Something about the baby not kicking enough, I think. But that's not the point"—his mother raised her eyebrows, but he didn't notice and forged ahead breathlessly—"it's just that she's frightened. I don't think it's anything specific. She's just, you know, frightened. It's all so strange. The doctor recommended a midwife, but the woman's French is terrible. I tried to get one of the Italian women to come, but most of the Italians leave their wives in their home cities. Or, I guess, they *used* to have them with them, at least some of the time, but because of the growing unrest they've sent them home. They don't feel safe anymore, they say, and—"

"We can talk about that later," his father interceded again, with a glance at his wife. "Right now we need to hear more about Eschiva."

John took a deep breath. "There's really nothing more to tell, except that she's having these dizzy spells and doesn't feel well, and nobody speaks French, you see, so she can't talk to anyone. I'm not sure there's anything really wrong, but she's lonely and frightened, and . . . " John hesitated, but then continued with the utter sincerity of youth, "She couldn't bring herself to say it, Mama, but she desperately wants you to come and be with her when her time comes. She's ashamed to ask, because she insisted on going to Cyprus in the first place. Lord Aimery wanted her to stay until she was safely delivered, but she wanted to be with him, and now she's ashamed to admit she made a mistake. She didn't ask me to come get you, but when I said I would—you should have seen her face! She was *so* relieved, Mama. She *needs*

you to be with her—more than Isabella ever did." John put all his heart into his case, the images of Eschiva still vivid in his mind's eye.

Before his mother could answer, Georgios returned with a large pitcher of water, a bottle of vinegar, and gauze. Maria Zoë thanked him and told her son to take off his hose so she could get a look at his knee.

"I'll go check on Centurion," Balian announced, hauling himself to his feet and leaving his wife to look to his son's injuries.

John's knee was scraped, cut, and badly swollen. After washing as much of the dirt and sand out of it as possible, Maria Zoë started to apply the vinegar to clean it more deeply, but John's yelps and squirms induced her to send Georgios for wine, which she could lace with a pinch of ground henbane.

By the time John had been sedated, his wounds cleaned and bandaged, and he had been put to bed, the dawn was breaking. There was no point in going back to her own bed; Maria Zoë knew she would not be able to sleep. Not wanting to wake Beatrice so early, she sponged herself down with some of the water brought for John, changed into a day gown, re-braided her hair, and covered it with a pale-blue silk scarf. Then she took a shawl against the morning chill, and made her way down to the rooftop terrace to await the sunrise.

It was here Balian found her, facing east as the sun rose over the distant mountains and flooded the valley with a pale, hazy light. He came up behind her, and before he could speak she turned to tell him she must go to Eschiva.

She didn't get a word out. He put his finger to her lips, and asked her instead, "Do you remember when I came to you in Jerusalem? The Patriarch, the burgesses, the sisters of St. Anne, the brothers of the Hospital, the common people in the streets, Syrian, Armenian, and Frank alike—they all expected me to stay. But defense was futile, so staying meant condemning us all to death. Or so I thought at the time. I went to the Holy Sepulcher, down into the tomb itself, and I lay there beside where our Savior's corpse had been stretched out after his crucifixion. I tried not to think at all. I emptied my mind of all thought and will. And after a time, I don't know how long, I knew I had to stay even if it was futile.

"We now know that it wasn't futile—that God had a plan—but at the time I could not know that. I dreaded telling you that I had chosen to sacrifice you and our four little children to something I could not even define. Was it duty? Was it symbolism? Was it the will of God? I just knew I had to stay—but didn't have the words to explain myself.

"But I didn't have to, because you understood. You didn't even ask for an explanation. All you said was: 'I know.'" He paused,

remembering that moment seven years earlier, savoring the memory. Then he continued, “Well, I know now, too. You have to go to Eschiva. Sooner rather than later; the fall storms could start any day. The only thing I’m unsure about is whether I should let you go alone or come with you.”

“Would you?” Maria Zoë looked up at him so hopefully that it made him laugh.

“You want me to come?”

“Yes, I do! Don’t tell John, but I don’t *entirely* feel he’s a match for pirates, assassins, or thieves just yet. But mostly, I just hate being separated. I’ve become accustomed to having you around me these last two years. I like it. But can you leave things here?” she asked anxiously.

“I will need to make arrangements, and they will delay your departure.”

“How much?”

“Two to three days.”

“That’s nothing,” she exclaimed with relief, adding happily, “John’s in no state to ride today or tomorrow as it is. Besides, I don’t think Eschiva is due for another three to four weeks. We should still be able to make it in good time. Didn’t John say he made the crossing with Magnussen in under twenty-four hours?” She was excited, pleased to think she could go to Eschiva without being separated from Balian. After a moment, however, she paused her racing thoughts, cocked her head, and asked, “Why do *you* want to come? It’s not just to be with me, is it?”

He laughed, bent and kissed her, and then admitted, “No, not entirely. I’m curious. First Aimery and now John have fallen in love with the place. And . . . ” his voice faded out.

“What?”

He took a deep breath and looked out from the terrace across the walled garden to the paddocks beyond. They were brown and barren at this time of year, places where the horses could move freely and get fresh air but not graze. Beyond them the domain fields started, plowed but not planted, waiting for the first rains. His eyes swept north toward the river, the sugar-cane fields, and the mill amid its cluster of low, plaster-covered houses, and he sighed. Rather than putting his feelings into words, he asked, “Are you happy here? Does it feel like home?”

Maria Zoë nodded in understanding rather than agreement. “Those are two different questions. Yes, I am happy here, because we have peace and I have my family around me. As for it being home . . . it’s

different for me. Girls are raised from the cradle knowing that the home of their childhood will not be the home of their adulthood. They know that when they marry they will go to a new place, which will become their home. In my case, I was sent to a completely different land filled with strange people and strange customs, which made it hard for me to feel at home for a long time. It didn't help that Amalric and I lived not only in Jerusalem, but in Acre, Tyre, and Jaffa. I'm not sure I felt at home anywhere before he died. When I was widowed and moved to Nablus, I started to feel at home, but then you entered the picture, and I had to divide my time between Nablus, Ibelin, and Jerusalem. We'd only been married ten years when King Guy lost the kingdom at Hattin. After Hattin we were in Tyre for five years, living in someone else's house on borrowed time. We've been here two years. So does this feel like home? No, not particularly. Home is where *you* are, or should I say, where you are happy. If you want to go to Cyprus, I have no objection." She paused, smiled a little impishly, and added, "Of course, if you want a piece of it, you'll have to recognize Aimery de Lusignan as your overlord."

Balian burst out laughing. "Didn't I say Henri would recognize John's dog Barry for the sake of a barony? Well, I'm not much better. I'm willing to bend my knee to Aimery. I did it to his idiot brother, remember?" The bitterness was still there.

"And regretted it ever after."

"Aimery's not Guy."

"No," Maria Zoë conceded, thinking it through, "and he will never be able to treat you like his vassal, either. You've been equals for far too long—not to mention you're his wife's uncle—and, if nothing else, you'll still hold Caymont from the Crown of Jerusalem."

"Or the Sultan, depending on how you look at it," Balian quipped before becoming more serious and noting, "Perhaps more important on Cyprus: you're a Comnena."

"Hmm. We'll soon see if that holds any water anymore. Isaac was, by all accounts, not very popular."

"Perhaps, but he was feared and respected." Balian paused and then announced, "Then it is settled. We will go to Cyprus, both of us. I'll take six of my household knights, so with them, their squires, myself, and my squires, you'll have fifteen armed men as your escort. And John. Is that enough for you, my lady queen?"

Maria Zoë replied, "Indeed, my lord. It should be enough." Then she leaned forward and kissed him.

Over the next two days, Balian set about appointing officials to run his barony in his absence. He named the Syrian Christian who had been most active in reorganizing the community after it resettled in Caymont "ra'is," the official responsible for serving as an intermediary between his estate officials and the native tenants. To enforce the law and keep order, he named Sir Roger Shoreham "dragoman." Shoreham had been one of the sergeants Balian knighted during the defense of Jerusalem, and he had proved his solid reliability and incorruptibility many times over his fifteen years of service to Ibelin, but he was aging and in no mood for new adventures. He was happy to remain in Caymont with his grandchildren. The last appointment, that of scribe, had been most difficult. Far more than their title implied, scribes were the financial administrators of a lordship, the tax and rent collectors, the bookkeepers and accountants. Balian would have liked to appoint his confessor of many years, Father Michael, but after much mental agony he decided to name the perpetually dissatisfied Bart d'Auber. While he hated rewarding someone for nothing, Balian had to face the fact that Bart might become even more disruptive of the community if he wasn't given some authority. Since the position of scribe was usually filled by a man of knightly rank and it came with a fief and house, it assuaged Bart's damaged pride. The fact that Bart's command of Arabic was (due to his years in Arab slavery) exceptional helped justify the appointment—and Father Michael was given the task of reporting to Balian any abuses or complaints against him from the tenants.

With these officials appointed and sworn in before tenants, Balian was ready to plan his own departure. Meanwhile Maria Zoë had decided to take Beatrice with her, leaving the nursery of children in the hands of Henri de Brie's wife, Heloise. What Balian and Maria Zoë had not reckoned with was a revolt by the older boys.

Their youngest son, Philip, and Aimery de Lusignan's firstborn, Guy, were both twelve, and Joscelyn d'Auber was thirteen. Just after vespers, when Balian and Maria Zoë left the chapel preparing to retire to the solar for a few hours of peace before bed, the three boys blocked their way.

"We have to talk, Papa!" Philip opened belligerently. "I'm not a baby anymore. I shouldn't have to stay in the nursery with the girls and the *children*." He was referring to Aimery's youngest son and namesake, who was only four, and Henri de Brie's young sons.

Guy immediately backed him up, declaring, "It's *my* mother who wants help! She would want me to come. I can cheer her up!"

Joscelyn kept his mouth shut, but his presence expressed his position. He, too, wanted to go to Cyprus.

Maria Zoë put a restraining hand on her husband's arm, half expecting him to explode with indignation at such a disrespectful confrontation. The boys arguably needed a good hiding for confronting the Baron of Ibelin in this rude manner, but Balian seemed less offended than Maria Zoë expected. Instead of reproaching them for their tone and attitude, he dismissed them with a wave of his hand. "I can't afford to take deadweight along. That's an end of it."

"But we're not *deadweight*!" Philip protested indignantly. "I can take care of Ras—"

"We're not taking any destriers, just palfreys," his father interrupted him.

"But I'm even better with Hermes!" Philip spluttered, referring to his father's favorite riding horse. "And Guy and Joscelyn can help with the horses, too!" he added, harvesting vigorous nods from his companions.

"We have our squires; what do we need the likes of you for?" Balian countered dismissively.

"But the squires can look after the weapons, and—and—we can serve you at table and look after your clothes and run errands and—and—anything you want us to do," Guy piped up. "Just like I did for King Richard."

"Really?" Balian asked, looking from one boy to the other in mock disbelief, while Maria Zoë bit her tongue to keep from laughing; she now knew he was teasing the boys.

"John got to ride out with you in Tyre!" Philip reminded his father indignantly.

"He *couldn't* have been as young as you are," Balian answered as if irritated.

"Yes, he was!" Philip insisted. "He was *younger*! He was only *ten*!"

"Really? You're sure about that?"

Philip was beginning to suspect his father was teasing him. "Yes, you *know* he was. My lord."

"Ah, that's better," Balian noted with a quick twitch of his lips. "Because I'm certainly not taking any impudent little boys who have not yet learned their manners."

"No, my lord," Philip adjusted his tactics instantly, echoed by Guy and Joscelyn.

With them now standing contritely in front of him, Balian asked, "So, you want to come with me to Cyprus. Why? It's just to get away from your lessons, isn't it?"

"No, no! Not at all, my lord!" Philip's eyes widened in a look of

such perfect innocence that Maria Zoë couldn't hold her giggles in any longer and had to cover her mouth with her hand.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," his father answered seriously, ignoring his wife's unhelpful behavior. "Because Father Angelus is coming with us, and *if* I were to let you come, then you would be expected to spend at least two hours every day perfecting your Greek."

Philip's eyes darted between his mother and father. He wasn't sure about his father yet, but he sensed his mother was not at all opposed to this suggestion. That meant she would be his ally behind closed doors. He smiled an angelic smile at her and then assured his father, "But I *love* learning Greek, my lord—"

That was too much for Balian. He burst out laughing—and then cuffed his son lightly with the admonishment, "Don't lie to me, boy. You hate it. You always have. Just like John. But that doesn't interest me. If you come with us, you'll spend five hours in the classroom every day, not just four, until your Greek is at least as good as John's. Then we'll see whether Father Angelus thinks we can reduce class time or not. Last I heard, your Latin was nearly as bad as your Greek, your French spelling was nothing short of comic, and you thought Edinburgh was in the Holy Roman Empire."

"Well, Hamburg and Rothenberg and Regensburg are," Philip defended himself, adding hastily before his father could get out a disgusted word, "and I'm good with geometry, my lord. Ask Father Angelus!"

"I will," his father promised. "Now go to bed. All of you!"

Joscelyn and Guy said a hasty, "Yes, my lord. Good night, my lord," happy to have escaped without actually provoking any rage, but Philip started to leave and then turned back. "Was that a 'yes' or a 'no,' Papa?" he wanted to know.

"I haven't decided yet," his father told him truthfully. "So scat before I decide you're a nuisance."

Philip took the hint and ran after his friends.

Maria Zoë took Balian's arm but said nothing, leaving him to sort through his thoughts on his own. In the solar, she seated herself in her favorite chair by the fire. Georgios was waiting with wine, which he poured into two of the beautiful enameled goblets they had saved from the house in Jerusalem. Only after Balian had also seated himself did she speak. "I think it *would* do Eschiva good to have Guy with her, and he did serve in the *household* of Richard of England, admittedly more a page to Queen Berengaria than Richard. Still, he knows the duties. We've been giving them both a little too much freedom here."

Balian nodded and looked over to her. "That's what I was thinking,

too. But I'm also serious about them not interrupting their schooling. The older a man gets, the less time he has for education. If I hadn't found myself serving a prince under the tutelage of a great scholar like William of Tyre, I would be a half-ignorant man. It was also a perverse benefit of being cooped up in Tyre that John had more time to study than otherwise. I don't want Philip to be less educated."

"We'll have access to more learned men on Cyprus than we do here in Caymont."

"Greek scholars, I presume you mean."

"Yes, but one learns a language by hearing it all the time. Cyprus will be good for Philip's Greek."

"It certainly did wonders for John's. And Joscelyn? What do you make of his request?"

"That he no longer wants to run away to al-Adil. That's a first and important step to returning to the True Faith. I think it is a very good thing."

Balian nodded thoughtfully. "So, we'll take them along?"

"Yes, I think we should."

Balian smiled. "Good. I rather like the thought of seeing what sort of trouble Philip will get himself into next."

Chapter Eleven
Faltering Dynasty

Nicosia
Late August 1194

ESCHIVA WANTED TO DIE. IT WAS that simple. She wanted to die, and she couldn't understand why God had taken her infant son and left her alive to face the shattered wreck of her marriage. She couldn't bear to face Aimery ever again.

They had torn the little baby out of her womb and told her he was dead. They hadn't even shown him to her, or let her hold him in her arms. They had just whisked him away, scolding her in their incomprehensible tongue.

She had screamed and screamed in protest, but it had done no good. They had taken him away wrapped in a shawl, and she wasn't even allowed to see that he was really dead. Maybe they had just stolen her baby so the hated "despot" would not have a child here? Or maybe one of the women just wanted him for herself? How would she ever know? She couldn't understand a word they said.

But without the baby, she could not face Aimery. She had stopped them from fetching him. They didn't understand much of what she said, but they had understood that much. Shaking their heads and clucking, they had gone out and just left her here alone. In the filthy sheets. With the stench of death and failure all around her.

She did not know how long she had been alone, but long enough for her sweat and tears to turn cold where they had soaked the linens. Cold enough to make her shiver, though God knew the room was stiflingly hot, or had been when she struggled to deliver a dead child . . .

Oh, God, why? Why don't you just take me away so I don't ever have to go through this again? Or see the disappointment and anger on Aimery's face? Or worse, hear him renounce me, turn me out. . . .

The door crashed open and women rushed into the room, chattering and tripping over themselves as they tried both to move and to fall on their knees at the same time. Their voices were anxious, urgent,

defensive, and then silenced by a single command. Eschiva gasped and struggled to lift her head enough to see to the door. A woman was sweeping past the kneeling servants with shimmering golden veils pinned to her head by a crown. Pearls gleamed on the bodice of her gown. The image was so reminiscent of an icon that for an instant Eschiva thought God had heard her prayers: she was dead, and the Virgin Mary was striding toward her.

But then the Virgin Mary let out a stream of words in Greek that didn't sound mild or sweet-tempered, as Eschiva expected of the Virgin. Furthermore, the words scattered the women in all directions as if in panic, and Eschiva had come to herself enough to recognize Maria Zoë.

A moment later Maria Zoë had reached the bed and, seating herself on it, pulled Eschiva into her arms. "I'm so sorry, Eschiva! I'm so, *so* sorry! I thought your time was still weeks away!"

"It was," Eschiva gasped out, breaking down into miserable, choking sobs. "It was, but—but—he came early. He was dead. Or they *say* he was dead. They took him away from me!" She wailed this out, reliving it all over again.

"Hush, hush, hush," Maria Zoë whispered, stroking Eschiva's face and head, while tightening her hold so Eschiva could gain strength from the warmth and comfort of her arms and bosom.

Feeling the pearls of Maria Zoë's bodice, however, Eschiva tried to pull back. "I'll ruin your beautiful dress, Tante Marie. I'm so dirty!"

"Then the lazy hussies will have something else to do—after they've cleaned up the mess here, made a proper meal, and washed down the corridors as well! This palace looks as if no one has taken a mop to it since Isaac Comnenus died!" Maria Zoë retorted indignantly. "But first and foremost, we need to get you cleaned up so you can see Aimery."

"No! I can't face him! I've failed him! He'll renounce me, Tante Marie—just like my father—"

Maria Zoë put her fingers to Eschiva's lips. "Shhh!" she ordered.

Eschiva swallowed down the words, but they burped back up as hiccups and gasps for breath.

Maria Zoë pulled her back into a close embrace. "Listen to me, Eschiva."

Eschiva tried, but she couldn't stop the sobs, so Maria Zoë just sat and held her until they ebbed on their own. Then she asked gently, "Can you listen now?"

Eschiva nodded in resignation.

"Aimery is outside banging his head against the wall and blaming

himself. He thinks the reason they won't let him in is that you're dead or bleeding to death. He has called for a priest, and he just told me that he would—"

Women burst in on them, carrying a tub and several amphorae of steaming rose water. Maria Zoë turned to give orders for setting up the bath, and then turned back to Eschiva and pulled her soaked and bloodied gown up over her head. She tossed the gown across the room in disgust and then helped Eschiva onto her feet and helped her hobble to the bathtub, all the while giving further orders to the women. These rushed to strip the dirty sheets from the bed, remove the basin full of blood beside the birthing stool, manhandle the stool to the side of the room, and start wiping up the marble floor.

"They told me he was dead, but they wouldn't even show him to me," Eschiva told Maria Zoë in a notably calmer voice as she sank into the warm water of the tub.

Maria Zoë stroked her forehead, turned, and demanded a sponge. Then, pushing back her outer sleeves and heedless of the inner sleeves, she dipped the sponge in the water to start gently washing Eschiva's face with the clean water. "Sweetheart, John told us the babe had not been kicking in the womb. If that's true, he had probably been dead for some time before the birth. Which means, of course, that development had stopped and he was not—whole. That's why the midwife didn't want you to see him."

Eschiva bit her lower lip as she began sobbing again, but this was a different sobbing, the sobbing of grief rather than protest. She knew it was true. She had known it before she first sent for the doctor, before she'd told John. . . .

The warm water was calming her, as were the gentle strokes of the sponge on her face. Maria Zoë spoke to her again gently: "We brought Guy with us, and Philip and Joscelyn."

Eschiva opened her eyes and lifted her head from the padded rim of the tub. "*My* Guy? My son? He's here? On Cyprus?"

"Yes, but we can't let him see you like this. Come. We need to wash out your hair." As she spoke Maria Zoë put the sponge aside to unbraid Eschiva's hair, and then ordered her to dunk her head under the water.

Eschiva did as she was told. (People rarely disobeyed Maria Zoë.) The water made her long hair swim and swirl around her. When she came up again for air, Maria Zoë started combing it away from her face with her long fingernails. Eschiva had always admired her for those long, beautifully filed nails. She couldn't seem to grow her own. They broke or got chewed off. . . .

"I'm going to have a long talk to the midwife," Maria Zoë was saying now, "but if I understood her apologetic babbling as I came in, she said you will be fine. She insists there is nothing fundamentally wrong with you at all. The bleeding stopped very promptly, she said, and the afterbirth came out cleanly. Are you in any pain?"

"Not more than normal," Eschiva admitted.

"Good." Maria Zoë turned and issued orders again, and promptly a woman was beside the tub with a large linen towel, which she held open between outstretched arms. But Maria Zoë shook her head and sent her scurrying away.

"They're so obedient to you," Eschiva observed, with a wan smile. "They always pretend not to understand a word I say."

"For which I've promised to have them stripped naked and flogged through the streets of Nicosia," Maria Zoë told her briskly.

Eschiva put her hand to her mouth. "You didn't!" She was at once both horrified and delighted.

"I did, but I'll probably be persuaded by much contriteness into commuting that sentence to throwing them all out and hiring new staff. I won't have this—what's that wonderful German word Mistress Shoreham always used? *Schlampenwirtschaft*—slut household. But first—Beatrice?" Maria Zoë looked around the room and found her own lady helping to make up the bed with clean linen sheets. "Beatrice, come help Eschiva finish her bath, while I go tell Aimery his wife is *not* on her deathbed."

"No!" Eschiva caught her aunt's arm. "No, I can't. He—"

"Listen to me!" Maria Zoë hushed her firmly. "You've miscarried a child. It happens to all of us. I miscarried one of Amalric's children, too. Your mother miscarried several times. It is God's will, though we cannot understand it. It was His will to call this child to him early. That's all there is to it. You're fine. You're not yet thirty. There's every reason to think you can conceive again—and if not, you have two wonderful sons already. You were right to come here, Eschiva. This island needs a government, not an army of occupation. Now, I'm going to tell Aimery the good news before he suffers any longer. I'll be back."

Outside the birthing chamber John waited anxiously, but he relaxed at the sight of his mother's calm face. "She's going to be all right?"

"She's fine. She lost the baby, that's all. It happens. Take me back to Lord Aimery." The birthing chamber was traditionally a room far from the royal apartments—so the screaming would not be too disruptive of government—and Maria Zoë did not yet know her way around this

palace. As John led her through the apparent maze of corridors, Maria Zoë had time to note in greater detail the little signs of neglect. King Guy had obviously not been concerned with the maintenance of his principal residence, and Aimery hadn't had time. Eschiva had her work cut out for her, Maria Zoë concluded—but that was a good thing, as it would distract her from this latest loss. They would start by replacing the entire staff, including poor Anne, who was clearly too traumatized to be of any use. Hopefully she would find peace in a convent. In her place they would hire a local girl, and they would replace the entire pack of servants. People who owed their positions to the new regime were more likely to be loyal to the House of Lusignan. Maria Zoë found the thought of turning the palace on its head invigorating.

Men's voices, low and strained, greeted them as they entered Aimery's private apartment. Dick de Camville was waiting anxiously by the door and, not knowing Maria Zoë, he could not read her face instantly. "Is my lady dead? Is the Lady Eschiva dead?"

"No. She's going to be fine."

Dick crossed himself, and his lips moved in a prayer of thanks. In the short fortnight he'd been in the service of Aimery and Eschiva, he had developed a deep affection for Eschiva. Lord Aimery was certainly no Guy, just as John had promised, but it was Lady Eschiva who had won his heart by her kindness. She had made him feel like part of the family.

Maria Zoë continued deeper into the room, where Aimery sat crumpled in a chair with his face in his hands. Balian stood opposite him, and he interrupted himself at the sight of Maria Zoë. As Balian's voice fell silent, Aimery sat bolt upright and twisted around to look at Maria Zoë, an anguished look on his ravished face.

"She's fine, Aimery," Maria Zoë assured him, coming closer and laying her hand on his shoulder. "She's miscarried a child, but she's fine. The bleeding has stopped; the afterbirth discharged cleanly; she has no fever. The midwife seemed quite competent, from what Eschiva said, but the household servants are a pack of slovenly hussies who should all be flogged publicly. This entire palace is filthy—as you apparently haven't noticed—and where there's filth, there's corruption. They're probably robbing you blind by selling off bits of stores, supplies, pieces of valuable furnishings, even the very substance of the palace decorations. I will demand to see an inventory shortly, but for now the important thing is that Eschiva is physically fine." She paused and waited as Aimery caught his breath and stared at her expectantly. She had used the flood of words to give him time to get a grip on his emotions; she used the pause to make sure she had

his full attention. “Eschiva’s problem is not physical, Aimery. It’s emotional. She seems to think you will not forgive her for losing this child.”

Aimery scowled. “Where does she come up with nonsense like—”

“That doesn’t matter. The point is, she thinks you will blame her for this dead child, so much so that you will set her aside—”

“That’s ridiculous! I—”

Maria Zoë held up her hands. “I’m only telling you so you know what to say to her when you go to her. Reassure her, Aimery. Tell her how much you love her. I’m going back to her now, but I’ll let you know when she’s ready to receive you.” She was gone as soon as she finished speaking.

Aimery turned his baffled eyes to Balian to ask, “How can she possibly think I would reject her after this? I’ve never *once* threatened to set her aside. Christ in Heaven! I have no grounds for it, and the Church wouldn’t allow it even if I wanted to.”

“It’s my brother’s fault,” Balian concluded simply. “It’s not just that he set her mother aside after twenty-odd years of marriage; Eschiva feels he abandoned *her* when he renounced his titles and went to Antioch, never to be heard from again. If my little girl, Helvis or Meg, had been married, say, to a prince of Armenia, who was then taken captive by the Seljuks, while the whole country was overrun and my daughter was trapped in a besieged city—”

“I know,” Aimery interrupted. “You would have ridden through hell itself to bring her home.”

“How do you know that?” Balian asked, astonished.

“Because you did, didn’t you? You went to Jerusalem to free your wife and children—something none of the rest of us would have done. Tripoli even advised *against* going to his wife’s rescue, remember?” He paused just long enough to suggest his respect for this action before continuing, “Fortunately, I don’t have to go to such extremes. All I have to do is cross the palace and go down on my knees before her. I’ve been thinking, Balian, ever since I came back. It’s not enough to give men “control” of one area or another. That’s not a legal or heritable status—even if dear brother Geoffrey doesn’t come back and reverse everything I’ve done!” His frustration and uncertainty over his brother’s reaction was evident in his raw tone. He added tensely, “I need to be able to make barons, and for that I need a crown.”

Balian nodded.

“Who created the Crown of Jerusalem?” Aimery asked.

“The leaders of the First Crusade.”

"Not the Pope?" Aimery sounded surprised by the answer.

"The Pope would have preferred an ecclesiastical state headed by the Patriarch, but the men who'd fought their way to Jerusalem and then extended the boundaries one bloody square mile at a time weren't about to accept that solution. Besides, the Patriarch was helpless without armed protection. An ecclesiastical state would not have survived a decade, even against the weak and fragmented Muslim lords who controlled the surrounding territories at the start of this century. The barons made the king, Aimery, which is why the High Court still has the right to select the next monarch."

"But how can barons create a king, if only a king can create barons?"

"A paradox, I admit. The law of conquest helped with the creation of the early baronies. John tells me that you had success in winning the leading men already on the island to your cause; am I right?"

"Yes, both Englishmen admitted that Richard of England is too entangled in a desperate struggle for his hereditary lands to taken an interest in ruling Cyprus. If only he'd chosen the crown of Jerusalem over that of England!" Aimery exclaimed, shaking his head. Then, drawing a breath, he returned to the subject at hand. "Your nephew Brie demanded a ridiculous price, by the way! I had to cede him one of the six royal castles on the island, Kantara, *and* promise to give him a free hand throughout the Karpas peninsula. That's little short of highway robbery!" Aimery told Balian indignantly.

"Speaking of which," Balian interposed, "Famagusta is a pirate's nest. The corsairs are literally anchored three deep, and they dart out to prey on merchant shipping traveling between the Levant and Europe. It's no wonder Champagne thought your brother was behind them and believed their purpose was to destabilize his reign. They are a severe menace to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, because they threaten the Kingdom's lines of communication and supply. You need to clean them out."

"I know, but I've got more important things to do first," Aimery answered, irritated. "Haakon Magnussen, as my *admiral*," he noted sarcastically, "will have to deal with them—if he ever comes back. First I've got to get control of Cyprus itself, whether dear brother Geoffrey decides to turn up or not. Walter de Bethsan has taken control, in my name, of the most impregnable castle ever built—much better than Kerak or Krak des Chevaliers. I'll have to show it to you. The Greeks call it St. Hilarion, but for some reason the Italians call it Dio d'Amore—Dieu d'Amour. Galganus de Cheneché is holding the other mountain fortress of Buffavento, and Barlais is holding the castle and port of Kyrenia—though I'm not sure whether he's holding it for

me, himself, or dear brother Geoffrey," Aimery admitted. "The same holds for Rivet at Larnaka. The Templars still maintain a presence in Gastria and Limassol, which is the only reason the latter port is still halfway functioning, but God only knows whose side the Templars are on or for how long. If Geoffrey shows up, they're just as likely to recognize him as me. The Hospitallers, on the other hand, have pulled out altogether—cutting their losses, they say, after their sugar mill at Kolossi was burned down. And now, for the first time, trouble has also broken out in the west part of the island. A large roundship bound for Marseilles with returning pilgrims was wrecked just north of Paphos, and apparently the locals slaughtered every single poor soul who survived the wreck—in violation of the laws of God. They *certainly* seized all the salvage, in violation of the laws of Comnenus! You may say that's not so important," Aimery hastened to counter the argument he presumed was on Balian's tongue, "but it's indicative of the spirit of contempt in which the people here hold me—and all Franks."

"You need to win over the Church." It was the voice of Maria Zoë, who had returned unnoticed by the men.

Aimery started and looked over at her. "May I go to Eschiva now?"

"Shortly. But I am serious. If you want to win the people of Cyprus, you must first convince the Greek clergy on the island that you will not try to impose Latin rites on them or their flocks, that you will not confiscate their properties or tax them, and then that you will treat their people fairly. How we define 'fair' may be a matter of interpretation and negotiation, but you will not have peace on this island until you have the Greek Church on your side."

Aimery stared at her, still absorbing her message, but Balian shrugged and announced, amused, "*ee vasilissa exee lalisee*: the Queen has spoken."

Aimery looked at him askance, and Maria Zoë smiled. "Come. Eschiva needs some rest, but she won't be able to sleep until she's been reassured you still love her and do not blame her."

Aimery nodded and then remembered to ask, "How do I look?"

"Terrible," Balian answered, "which is just the way you *should* look. She should see how distressed you have been."

Aimery nodded absently; in his mind he was already preparing his words. Maria Zoë led him through the corridors, and as he approached the chamber containing his wife, he was pleased by the way the women all went down on their knees and bowed their heads nearly to the floor—until he realized it was for Maria Comnena, not himself. Damn it, he thought, but then he was inside a room gleaming with wet marble and smelling of roses. The sheets were so white they seemed almost to glow. There were even fresh hibiscus in a glass vase

beside the bed. Eschiva was all but lost in the puffy pillows, and her huge eyes followed him as he approached the side of the bed. She reached out a hand to him tentatively: it appeared to plead more than to welcome.

Aimery fell on his knees beside the bed, took her hand and kissed it, and then held it to his cheek. "Forgive me, Eschiva," he croaked out. "I should never have allowed you to risk your own life or that of our child by coming with me."

"Aimery, my love," Eschiva assured him, struggling to sit up more, and Beatrice at once came to help her. "Aimery, it's all right as long as you aren't angry," she told him.

"Why, my love, should I be angry with you? You have done nothing wrong. You risked your life and that of our child to support me, and any setbacks we have are my fault—but, believe me, Eschiva." Aimery's voice was getting stronger as he spoke, reassured by how serene, self-possessed, and loving Eschiva looked. "I swear to you, Eschiva," Aimery declared, "I will make you a queen. They will recognize *you* as their queen. And, so help me God, our children and our children's children will rule this island kingdom for the next three hundred years!"

St. Hilarion, Late October 1194

The boys had never seen anything like it. From a distance the castle blended in so well with the crags and rugged contours of the landscape that they thought the towers were outcroppings. As they came closer, they realized that cascading down the steep slope of the mountain face was a wall that enclosed a partially overgrown area with a slope of 45 degrees or more. At the top of this a series of towers nestled against the back of a sheer limestone cliff. But they soon discovered that even these towers were only the outer line of defense. On the very top of the cliffs that reared up in jagged peaks and teeth of stone, there were more towers still. One crowned the top of a spike of rock with a skirt of pine trees all around it. The boys could only gape in wonder.

At the lower barbican, the party of Franks led by Lusignan and Ibelin dismounted, and the squires stayed there to see to the stabling and feeding of the horses, while Lusignan and Ibelin continued. They proceeded on foot up a steep, winding path punctuated with shallow steps to the wall against the cliff. The knights of their escort trailed them, with the three boys forming the tail of the formation. The

towers built against the side of the cliff were solid, crenelated, and well-fortified with gates, portcullis, murder holes, and more. Furthermore, they were dog-legged, sometimes twice, so that after entering, one faced a blank wall of stone and had to turn to continue. Only after emerging from the far side did it become evident that the second chamber was carved out of bedrock. Beyond that they exited onto a narrow spine of land that faced north rather than south.

This was like no castle the boys from Palestine had ever seen. The buildings were strung along the corniche of the mountain and connected by narrow footpaths that wound amid the outcroppings and the undergrowth, and—following the rugged contours of the mountain crags—dipped down steeply or scaled to new heights in a series of steps.

Almost as amazing as the structures themselves were the large gnarled trees that grew wherever the surface was too steep for either a path or a building. If the south slope by which they had gained the castle had seemed steep, the drop-off to the north was dizzying. The mountain dropped straight down for hundreds of feet before the forest resumed, clinging to the side of the mountain as it fell to the coastal plain. The latter was cultivated with patches of orchards, vineyards, pastures, and fields. A little port with a double harbor inside a breakwater and a powerful castle could be seen to the northeast—but mostly it was the lushness of the countryside that amazed the boys raised in the Holy Land.

Until they started exploring, that is. The “middle” castle, as they came to think of it, lay just behind the cliff they had passed through, and it had what seemed like endless storerooms, pantries, wine cellars (chock-full of wine!), a curing room for meat with a fireplace, a bakery, a brewery, an oil press and a winepress, even a stall for goats and a henhouse and pigeon cote. There were barracks here as well, only sparsely furnished and partially occupied, and an impressive basilica constructed of limestone interrupted by thin layers of brick to create a horizontally striped wall. The three apses of the church faced due east from the tip of the mountain crest. Unless one went to the window to look down, they offered views only of the sky—as if the building were suspended in the air.

Heading west through the maze of buildings, some connected underground, the boys eventually came to a narrow path that led beside the rocky face of the mountain upwards by means of narrow, steep steps toward a cluster of buildings crowning the top of the highest point on this ridge. The elder Lusignan and Ibelin and their knights had taken this route immediately, while the boys had been distracted by exploring the middle castle.

Now the boys followed, discovering that the "upper castle" was more cohesive, with a paved courtyard, and a number of impressive buildings with batteries of arched doors and double-light windows offering spectacular views in all directions. The ground floors of these buildings were often at least partially carved out of bedrock and usually windowless, but well stocked with grain, oil, wine, and weapons. The second floors of the buildings, in contrast, were paved with either tiles or marble. There were window seats in the windows, hooded fireplaces, and other signs of the luxury accommodations conspicuously lacking in the barracks of the middle castle.

When they had completed their round of the buildings facing the courtyard, they passed out by way of a gate facing west and discovered there was yet *another* lone tower, standing upright and defiant on a little peak of white rock roughly a thousand feet away. This tower was very narrow and tall with no windows, but topped by crenelation.

"How do we get *there*?" Philip asked in awe. There was no visible path. In fact, right in front of them the rocks fell sharply away, and they were looking at the tops of the pine trees. In short, they were separated from the tower by a shallow gorge.

"I think there's a trail over here," Joscelyn decided. He had wandered a little to one side.

Guy and Philip followed him and looked at the narrow, naked path that struck out into the trees from the foot of the rocky platform they were standing on. "I'm not so sure," Guy prevaricated. "It looks like nothing but a goat track to me."

"But look!" Philip pointed. "You can see it emerging from the trees there!" He pointed toward the tower. Sure enough, at the foot of the tower the trees parted a little, and a narrow white path wound up out of them to go along the base of the tower and disappear around the corner. "The door must be at the back of the tower," Philip concluded.

"But how do we get down to the start of the trail?" Guy asked. The beginning of the trail was a good six or seven feet below where they were standing.

"Oh, that's easy!" Philip announced. Dropping down onto his buttocks, he rolled over and, face to the rock, slowly lowered himself. The rock face being rugged, he had handholds and footholds. Once his feet hit the trail, he backed up (oblivious to the white dust smeared across his front) and waved at the other boys. "See! Easy!"

Joscelyn was already on his belly and following, leaving Guy little choice.

They followed the trail through the woods, the pine needles under

their feet and birds crying indignantly as they were disturbed from their perches. It was chilly here in the deep shadow, although the trees broke the wind somewhat. None of the boys gave a thought to the fact that some of the chill came from the fact that the sun was very low in the sky. They were too busy concentrating on the trail, which was more rugged than expected. The last hundred feet was a climb up the escarpment on which the tower was perched. They had to use their hands to haul themselves up as much as their feet to push them off. They were filthy, scratched, and breathless—but triumphant—by the time they reached the foot of the tower.

As they came around the first corner, however, they gasped in terror. The trail broke off abruptly and plunged down a thousand feet to a heap of broken masonry already half overgrown with gorse and thorn bushes. The outer half of the tower, concealed from view up to now, had collapsed.

Still shaken by how close they had come to stepping off the cliff, they turned around to return the way they'd come. Only now did they notice that the sun had already set, and night was closing in on them rapidly. "We'd better get back fast," Guy summed up the situation.

He got no contradiction from his companions. Rather, they all started to hurry, afraid to admit to one another how frightened they were becoming. The first challenge, of course, was getting down the face of the rock they had climbed up earlier with so much élan. Again they resorted to going down the face of the rock backwards, but in the fading light it was harder to find footholds. Now and again one or the other missed and slid more than stepped, scraping knees, elbows, and hands. But they made it.

The trail, however, was harder to find now that the shadows had enveloped it. Footing was harder to find, too. Partway, Joscelyn tripped over a root, staggered forward out of balance, and in trying to catch himself put his foot sideways on another root. With an audible "knick," his foot fell sideways off the root. He crashed down face first with a cry of alarm and pain. Philip was leading, and he stopped at once to look back. Guy turned and went back to Joscelyn to help him up.

"My ankle," Joscelyn gasped out. "It's broken."

"You probably just twisted it," Guy countered. "Here. I'll help you up."

Joscelyn shook his head. "I can't! I can't!" There was a whine and sob in his voice that was utterly unlike him. Joscelyn was no crybaby. He could usually take more and worse than the others, always anxious to prove that a Mamluke was better than any Frank. The pain and panic in his voice now made Philip turn around and return to find out

what had happened.

With Guy's help, Joscelyn had pulled himself into a sitting position with his back against the trunk of a tree, but his face was ghostly white, and he was holding up his right leg at the knee. The foot hung uselessly from it.

"Christ!" Philip whispered in shock.

"*He* can't help, you stupid polytheist!" Joscelyn snarled, and he started praying in Arabic.

"What are we going to do?" Guy asked Philip.

"One of us has to stay here with Jos, and the other better go get help."

Guy nodded.

"You'd better go," Philip decided; "it's your father's castle and his men. My father's here for the first time and doesn't know his way around."

Guy nodded again, but he didn't move.

"What's the matter?" Philip asked.

"I'm not sure I can find my way back or climb up the rock at the other end," Guy admitted.

"You have to!" Philip told him in a tone that was sharp with rising panic. "We can't stay here all night!"

It was starting to get decidedly cold now that the sun had set, and the wind seemed to have picked up as well.

"I know; it's just—"

"All right, then *you* stay here. I'll go for help!" Philip declared. He was inwardly just as afraid he might lose his way or fail to scale the rock, but now he was determined to show off his courage. He forged ahead with blind determination for a few hundred paces, only to stop abruptly. He was surrounded by darkness, and overhead the trees whispered to one another alarmingly. He hadn't a clue where the trail was. His breathing was getting louder and he could feel the pounding of his heart. He turned on his heel to return the way he'd come, but now he couldn't find the trail back, either.

Philip felt an intense need to pee, but he knew it was just fear. He *had* to find the trail. After looking this way and that, he gave up, and just struck out through the trees in the direction he thought the castle *should* be. The first time he tripped over a root, he froze with a new terror. If he broke his ankle like Jos had done, no one would ever find any of them. And there were lions up here in the mountains, John had said.

Philip held his breath to listen. Everything was still except for the

rustling of the treetops. Maybe that was because a lion was already stalking him! Philip started praying frantically and plunged forward through the forest, telling himself that as long as the ground was sloping upwards, he had to be going in the right direction.

It seemed like an eternity, but eventually he began to make out a rocky cliff, lighter than the forest, behind the trees. He'd made it back to the base of the castle. Only this wasn't the same place where they'd descended. The cliff was much taller—at least ten feet. Worse, to his left the ground dropped hundreds of feet into the darkness. Philip broke out into a cold sweat and started back along the base of the rock on which the castle perched.

He hadn't gotten very far when he saw light overhead. It was an unsteady light, yellowish and swaying. A torch!

"Hello!" he called out at the top of his voice. "Hello! Can anyone hear me?"

The torch swayed. "Hello?" came an answering call.

"Help!" Philip cried out with the strength of hope. "It's Philip d'Ibelin! I'm down below you!"

The torch moved, and a head silhouetted against the light of the torch looked over the edge of the cliff.

"How did you get down there? What are you doing?" With relief Philip recognized the voice of his father's squire Georgios.

"We just wanted to see the outer tower, but then Jos broke his ankle and it got dark, and I couldn't find my way back, and—"

"Stay there!" Georgios ordered. His head disappeared again and Philip could hear voices muttering. Then Georgios' head reappeared and he called down, "Follow the trail, keeping your right hand on the rock all the way until you come to some stairs. We'll be waiting for you there."

Philip had never been so relieved in his life. He turned, and keeping his hand on the surface of the cliff he slowly made his way back. After a few minutes he saw two torches descending in front of him. Georgios was accompanied by a sergeant from the garrison and his father's other squire, Amalric d'Auber, Jos's older brother.

As Philip came into the circle of light cast by the torch, Georgios could see his torn and dirty clothes. The squire frowned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine! It's Jos who broke his ankle."

"Are you sure?"

"It looks like jelly on the end of his leg," Philip answered graphically.

“Where is he?” Amalric asked tightly. Jos was, after all, his little brother, even if the boy’s conversion to Islam was almost as much a shame to him as his elder brother’s incompetence at arms.

“There’s a trail that leads to that tower over there!” Philip explained, pointing. The tower, pointing upward from the highest hillock to the west, stood out in sharp silhouette against the luminous western sky.

The sergeant grunted and added, “I know it.”

“Can you lead us there?” Georgios asked.

The sergeant nodded.

“Do we need a stretcher for Jos?” Georgios thought to ask.

“Surely we can carry him between us,” Amalric answered irritably, already annoyed by how much trouble his stupid brother was causing.

Georgios nodded, and they followed the sergeant first along the base of the castle and then into the woods. With the torches it was a lot easier. As they approached, Guy called to them in a voice that was high with fear: “Over here! Over here! Help!”

When they reached the two other boys, Georgios went down on one knee to examine Jos’s ankle and gasped. It was badly swollen and discolored already, but just as Philip had said, it was completely wobbly—which could only mean that every tendon and ligament had also snapped.

“You idiot!” Amalric burst out at his younger brother. “This is what comes of abjuring Christ! If you never walk again, it will be what you deserve! You brought it on yourself, you—”

“Amalric! Enough!” Georgios cut him short. Although Georgios was the son of a native tradesman, he was twenty-five years old, and he’d been in Ibelin’s service since before Hattin. Amalric might be the son of a knight, but he was just seventeen, and he’d been a slave for five years. When Georgios stared him down, Amalric looked at his feet resentfully.

“Take your brother under his arms from behind,” Georgios ordered Amalric next, and then addressed himself to Jos. “We can’t walk backwards on that trail. You’ll have to straddle me with your legs so I can hold them at the knees. I don’t want to touch that ankle. Understand?”

Jos nodded, swallowing hard, but tears were streaming down his face and his teeth were chattering.

“Doesn’t anyone have a cloak?” Georgios asked, recognizing shock.

The others shook their heads helplessly, so Georgios unhooked his aketon, pulled it off, and put it around Jos’s much smaller shoulders.

Then he turned around, stepped between Jos's legs, and hooked his hands under the boy's knees. "Ready?" he called to Amalric, and on the affirmative answer ordered, "Lift him up!"

Jos screamed at the jostling, but cut off his own cry. Then they set off, with the sergeant leading with the first torch and Philip bringing up the rear with the second.

It wasn't until Jos had been delivered to the castle barber (who doubled as surgeon) that Philip had time to start worrying. By now he knew that their absence had set off a massive manhunt. Well, maybe not *massive*, but the Lord of Lusignan's concern for his heir had resulted in search parties being sent in multiple directions. Because they'd been in such a hurry to get Jos and Guy out of the woods, their rescuers had not sent word that they were found. Their arrival at the castle barber set off such an explosion of shouts and activity that Philip and Guy knew they were in deep trouble. "Shit!" Guy kept saying. "Shit! My Dad's going to have my hide!"

"He'll have to fight my father for the honor!" Philip answered grimly, before adding, "We've got to tell them Jos broke his ankle on the way—no, that won't work, either. Maybe we could say—"

"The truth!" Balian's voice came out of the darkness behind them, making them both jump.

"Ah! Yes, my lord. You see—"

"No! I don't see." The next minute Balian had them each by the scruff of their neck and was pushing them in front of him to the steps leading up to the great hall.

The hall was full of people and oppressively hot after the cold of the night. Torches were lit all along the wall. A fire was roaring in the main fireplace on the inside wall. A sideboard had been set up with cold leftovers from the midday meal, and large pottery jugs of water and wine for the knights and squires to help themselves.

As Ibelin entered with the two boys, a ragged cheer went up, and Lusignan signaled for Ibelin to bring the boys up onto the dais. As they passed through the crowd, everyone turned to look at them, and Philip became conscious of how dirty, scruffy, and ragged he looked.

"You don't think he'll put us in the stocks, do you?" Guy whispered beside him, his eyes fixed on his father, who glowered at them from the high table. Guy sounded genuinely afraid, and Philip realized that Guy didn't know his father very well. Lord Aimery had been away most of the last two years, the very years when Philip had been getting to know his own father. Philip wasn't afraid. He knew he was in trouble, but he trusted that the punishment would be fair.

“So! What do you have to say for yourself?” Lusignan snarled at his heir as the latter came to a halt in front of him, Ibelin holding him firmly in place. “What were you doing? I had a hundred men out looking for you!”

Philip, with a glance over his shoulder at the roomful of men, thought the number was greatly exaggerated.

“We were just exploring,” Guy squeaked out uncomfortably. “We wanted to get to the outermost tower. We didn’t know it was a ruin.”

“Why didn’t you return before dark?” Lusignan demanded. “Don’t you know how dangerous it is to wander around in a forest after dark? Are you idiots, or what?”

“Jos tripped over a root and broke his ankle, and then I got lost trying to find the way back in the dusk. It was my fault,” Philip announced, and was gratified by the squeeze his father gave his shoulder. His father approved of him taking the blame.

Lusignan shifted his gaze to Philip, then back to his son. “Whose idea was this?”

“Mine!” the boys declared in unison, then looked at one another and smiled.

“Well said.” Ibelin patted them both on the back, and Lusignan nodded.

Ibelin added, “I hope you’ve both learned a lesson. A good soldier never loses sight of the sun, and always makes sure he has a secure place for the night. Never forget that!” The boys nodded vigorously.

Lusignan waved his hand in dismissal. “Go get yourself something to eat and then clean yourselves up.”

Balian released his grip on the boys so they could run back to the sideboard; then he mounted the dais, pulled out the chair next to Aimery, and sat down, remarking, “As long as they’re both safe and sound . . . ”

Aimery pushed a pitcher and goblet in his direction as he answered: “Yes, but if something had happened to Guy so shortly after losing this last baby, I don’t know what Eschiva would have done.”

“We can’t coddle them,” Balian reminded him.

“I know,” Aimery answered with a sigh, running his hand through his graying blond hair. “Nor do I want to, but—”

“My lord?” A knight with wind-blown hair was standing before the dais.

“Yes?” Aimery sat upright and asked expectantly.

“I was out looking for your son on the upper ramparts, and from there I spotted a sail far out to the west. The light was fading fast, so I

can't be sure, but I think it was a snecka. At any rate, it was very low in the water and running before the wind with shortened sail."

"Magnussen!" Aimery exclaimed at once, instantly filled with tension. Would the Norseman hurry back with good or bad news?

"We can't be sure," Balian warned.

"But the sailing season's over. We haven't seen a merchant ship in over a fortnight, not sailing west to east."

"Send someone to Kyrenia to find out what ship it is," Balian advised, adding, "presuming she puts in to Kyrenia."

"I'll send John. He knows and likes Magnussen."

Balian bit his tongue. Hadn't he said just two minutes earlier that they should not coddle their sons? Still, he didn't like the thought of John alone on the roads here, or in a port town—not after what he'd seen of Famagusta. "I'll have Amalric go with him," he decided, and Aimery made no objection.

Kyrenia, Late October 1194

The imperial road, built in the reign of the Emperor Manuel I, led from Larnaka via Nicosia to Kyrenia. It had been paved with massive square stones and had been wide enough for four men to ride abreast or for an ox-cart to move comfortably. From Larnaka to Nicosia it was still in good repair, but as it started up the backside of the Pentadaktylos range, although still intact, it became more rugged. The edges had often broken or been washed away. By the time it reached the pass itself, large portions of the road had been completely washed away by landslides. Instead of a road, there was just a dangerous trail of broken masonry, gullies, and rubble.

John, still distressed by the injury Centurion had taken on his trip home, at once jumped down and led the young bay palfrey his father had helped him choose in Caymont. Troubadour was a pretty, intelligent bay with a smooth gait and an easygoing temperament—an ideal palfrey. He was also very curious, and he found this unfamiliar landscape very provocative. He had to stop every few feet to look around and sniff at things, making Amalric impatient. "Just yank on the reins!" Amalric suggested irritably.

"Why?" John replied. "He's just looking around, and once he's figured things out he'll be calmer and more settled."

Amalric muttered something under his breath and then said out loud, "At this rate we won't make Kyrenia before dark!"

“We’ll make it,” John insisted, patting Troubadour on the neck as they continued.

John was right, and they reached Kyrenia well before nightfall, although it was late afternoon. The gates were open, and no one stopped them for papers or tolls. Once in the small city, they passed quickly down a sloping paved street between low stone buildings with flat roofs and plastered walls, heading straight for the harbor. This consisted of a nearly perfectly round inner harbor enclosed by a chain in the north. The chain stretched from a sea wall extending out from the foot of the castle in the east to a large customs house on the western shore. Beyond the chain was a man-made outer harbor created by two breakwaters that reached out like enfolding arms from east and west, almost meeting in the middle but leaving a gap just wide enough for ships to sail through. A lighthouse sat on the tip of the western breakwater, showing sailors the small harbor entrance.

The harbor was nearly empty. Local merchantmen had been laid up for the winter, leaving the harbor to a handful of fishing craft and a single oceangoing vessel that looked decidedly the worse for wear. The mast was broken about two-thirds of the way from the top and the prow was missing its figurehead. John gasped at the sight of her. He thought it was the *Storm Bird*, but without the figurehead he couldn’t be 100 per cent sure.

There was a lot of activity on deck, however. It looked as if all the rigging had been uncoiled and laid out on the deck, apparently to dry or to find weaknesses. The crew was also busy hanging out their clothes to dry and tossing rotten supplies overboard into the harbor—despite the outraged protests of a local fisherman who was shaking his fist at them.

John rode straight to the quay, looking for a familiar face. When he spotted Christian Arendsen, he started waving and shouting. “Christian! Christian! Welcome back! Is the *Storm Bird* badly damaged?” John jumped down from Troubadour and had to drag the horse closer to the ship. (Troubadour had not enjoyed the journey to Cyprus and was not the least inclined to repeat the experience. Barry, on the other hand, had been spoiled by the entire crew and now raced past his master, yapping in delight.)

Christian smiled broadly at the sight of John and Barry as he waved back. Grabbing a halyard made fast to the outer rail, he hauled himself onto the gunnel and jumped down onto the quay. “The mast broke a day out of Rhodes, taking the Bird with her, but she’s fine! We could jury-rig it pretty easily and the rest of the mast apparently didn’t split, but we’ll have to replace it here. Great forests, I’m told.” He looked left toward a bank of mountains covered with tall trees, a

rarity in most of the Mediterranean.

Haakon himself appeared at the side of his ship, hands on his hips, as he glowered down at John. For all that Christian had made light of their ordeal, John had only seen Haakon look this bedraggled once before: when he'd been part of a relief fleet for the besiegers of Acre in the winter of 1189. On that infamous trip they had been forced to break off the relief attempt and run back to Tyre after losing two ships. Certainly Haakon's leather aketon was encrusted with salt, his hair stringy, and his beard untrimmed. "Where did you come from?" Haakon demanded. "We only tied up two hours ago!"

"We saw a sail from up there," John pointed in the direction of St. Hilarion, "and Lord Aimery thought it might be you, so he sent me to find out. With Amalric here," he added with a gesture toward his companion before asking anxiously, "What news from Lord Geoffrey?"

Haakon's rugged face formed a twisted smile. "You'd better start calling me 'sir,' young man, because you're looking at an admiral."

"Lord Geoffrey's not coming? He turned Cyprus down?" John couldn't believe it. Not only did it seem too good to be true, it was simply impossible for him to imagine anyone *not* wanting Cyprus.

"He thinks the Plantagenet is a wounded lion that he can now take down with impunity."

"But why would he want to? King Richard is a great king!" John protested naively.

"Yeah, well, a great king who dumped the Lusignans in favor of Montferrat, remember? Lord Geoffrey hasn't forgiven him for that. His official answer was entrusted to a Genoese captain, but we left *him* wallowing under swamped decks in the Straits of Messenia. God knows when he'll make it—might not be till next spring."

"Do you want to bring the word to Lord Aimery yourself?" John asked. "Or should I ride back with the news?"

"We only docked two hours ago, for Christ's sake!" Haakon answered irritably. "I haven't been out of these clothes in a month, below deck it stinks enough to make even me want to puke, the rigging needs a complete overhaul, and we are all going to celebrate our successful passage tonight. Then, *after* I've recovered from the hangover, I'll think about getting on something as terrifying as a horse and taking the message to Nicosia."

"Lord Aimery isn't at Nicosia. He's at St. Hilarion." John pointed again in the direction of the castle, although it was quite impossible to see it from here.

"Well, wherever. You're not going to make it back tonight, either. Why don't you join us for a little well-earned celebration?"

John looked hastily back at Amalric. If it had been the steady and responsible Georgios, he would have received a shake of the head and dutifully said no. But Amalric was all for this idea. Norsemen had a reputation for wild parties. He nodded enthusiastically, and John agreed.

"Go find some lodgings, then," Haakon waved him off. "We need to get this ship tidied up a bit, but we'll be ready for some entertainment come sundown."

John nodded again, waved to Christian, and then turned to lead the way to the castle, where he and Amalric could ask for hospitality from the castellan, Reynald Barlais. With the horses put away, they left their bedrolls against the screens in the great hall and then returned to the harbor, Barry at their heels.

It wasn't sundown yet, however, so they decided it wouldn't hurt to get something to eat before joining the Norsemen. They found a small street stand selling freshly grilled octopus soaked in olive oil, and bought themselves a portion each. Then they returned to the *Storm Bird* and found the crew collecting on deck in their "best."

It was, John thought, an excitingly frightening collection of muscular men in an eclectic collection of armor and weapons, all jabbering in their peculiar language. John was both fascinated and uncomfortable. He found Christian and attached himself to the former cleric. Amalric, in contrast, despite having no common language, seemed surprisingly at ease with these men. He was very muscular, too, of course, and three years older than John.

At last Haakon emerged from somewhere aft and they set off. As they moved along the quay, John noticed that some of the establishments quickly closed their doors and bolted them. But as they got closer to where the fishermen were tied up, a couple of taverns remained open.

With the sun down, the air was chilly, and they moved as a horde into the vaulted ground floor of the tavern. Here they occupied the bulk of the tables, and Haakon ordered ale for everyone. The proprietor answered in Greek that he couldn't understand a word they were saying. Haakon turned and stared at John. John ordered ale for everyone.

"Let's hope it tastes better than horse piss," Haakon muttered generally, "or my crew might get out of hand. Better find out about the food," he added to John (who now understood why Haakon had wanted him to join them for the evening).

The ale, fortunately, met the approval of the Norsemen, as did the food—and the mood, rather than turning ugly, was becoming decidedly jolly. One of the Norsemen stood up on a bench and started

singing-speaking, to the apparent approval of his shipmates, who occasionally cheered or pounded the tables with their mugs in a kind of chorus. Now and then they even joined in, apparently as familiar with the saga he was reciting as the performer himself. When the latter sat down, they all started singing, beating the time with their mugs or their feet.

At first John loved the singing because it was melodic and forceful, but not understanding the words, he gradually became bored. It was now nearly compline anyway, and he was used to going to bed at this time. He always started the day at prime. He was trying to think of a way to excuse himself when Christian leaned over and said in his ear, "It's time for the wenches. Ask the landlord."

"Wenches?" John asked back, feeling completely out of his depth.

"Yeah. Just ask. He'll know what we want."

John took a deep breath and called the landlord over. "Ah. My friends here were wondering—ah—about—um—women." Wenches was just not a word he used. . . .

The landlord didn't seem surprised. He nodded and went away. Within a quarter of an hour, a score of women sauntered into the tavern and spread out among the tables. They were all shapes and sizes, some older, some younger, and yet they were also all the same in the way they smiled at the men, helped themselves to their ale, winked and gestured with their heads. One after another, the men started disappearing out the back with the women. John knew perfectly well what was going on, of course, but he'd never been a witness to it before. He felt acutely uncomfortable—aroused despite himself, yet also embarrassed.

Amalric didn't suffer from the same inhibitions. He had his arm around one of the girls and was kissing her hotly. When his hand started kneading her breast, however, John stopped watching them out of sheer shame.

A moment later, Amalric was beside him. "John, can you lend me ten dinars?"

"What?"

"I'll pay you back next month," Amalric promised, his breath laden with ale, and his hose poking through the slit in his surcoat. Seeing John's glance to his crotch, he flashed a smile. "Yeah, you can see the state I'm in! But if I can't pay she'll go with one of the others. Please! You must have it!" Amalric insisted, starting to get genuinely antsy.

John reached for his purse to pull out the coins, and Haakon's hand closed over his wrist in an iron fist. "Don't pull out your purse in a place like this!"

John looked at him blankly. “But Amalric—”

“I heard him. Where’s the madam?” He looked around and signaled to a woman who was standing with the landlord watching. She was not fat or old, as John had always assumed madams would be. Rather, she was tall and lithe with black hair and black eyes, and she moved toward them with a fluid grace that was almost like the sea itself.

She reached their table and greeted them with a smile on her lips and narrowed eyes. “Monsieur le Capitaine, I presume?” She, at least, spoke French, albeit with a strange accent.

“I’m good for every man in the room. Understood? Ten denier a turn, right?”

She nodded with that mirthless smile, her eyes shifting to John and Amalric.

Amalric muttered, “Thank you!” to Haakon and darted back to the girl, who was flirting with someone else. He grabbed her under her arm and dragged her up off the bench. She laughed, waved to the others, and put her arm around Amalric as he led her away.

The woman seated herself opposite them, her eyes fixed on Haakon. “What about you, Captain? It was a long, difficult crossing, or so I heard. So late in the year, and the ship nearly dismasted.” Her voice was like olive oil, soft, fluid, slippery.

“Join me for a drink,” Haakon answered instead.

“I don’t drink that horse piss,” she answered with a gesture of contempt toward the ale, making Haakon laugh. Then he asked, “Wine?”

“Red.”

“Of course.” Haakon looked to John, who with a sigh signaled the landlord. “The—” he’d been about to say lady, but that was clearly not the correct term in this case— “ah—we’d like a carafe of red wine, please.”

The landlord nodded and withdrew warily, leaving the three of them at the table. John felt very much like a fifth wheel. He looked frantically for Christian, but the younger Norseman had already disappeared. He turned to pet Barry instead, as he reckoned in his head: ten deniers a turn, times sixty men plus Amalric, and some of the men seemed to be taking two turns, or had they just passed out drunk? Any way you looked at it, it was a lot of money. How much money had Haakon made with his cargo of opium seed, root of camphor, and arsenic?

“Your girls. Are they clean?” Haakon asked.

“A lot cleaner than your men,” the madam answered back, with that

same smile that never reached her eyes.

"You don't know my men."

"And you don't know my girls."

Haakon raised his eyebrows, looked pointedly at the room around them, and then back at the madam with an amused expression. "Pardon me, Madame, I didn't realize we were talking about blushing virgins. Somehow that escaped my notice."

"You, captain, think we are the scum of the earth because we give you what you want. But you're wrong." She paused, then shook her head slowly and deliberately. "The scum of the earth is *you*!"

John caught his breath, expecting an explosion from Magnussen—and he was right, but it was an explosion of laughter, not rage. "Almost," Haakon declared as his laughter died. A smile still on his face, he declared, "We're the scum of the *sea*, not the earth. Here's your wine. Let me pour."

The landlord set the wine jug down and added three glazed pottery mugs, then withdrew again.

Haakon reached for the pitcher, poured wine into all three cups, and they each took one. "What's your name?" Haakon asked the madam.

"You don't care," she answered. "You don't *want* us to have names and stories. They just get in the way of business."

Haakon shrugged. "We haven't gotten to business yet—unless you want to consider a flat-rate price for the whole night. It would save us both the trouble of keeping tallies."

"A thousand dinars," she answered.

Haakon laughed. "You may have the only goods on offer, Madame, but they aren't *that* good."

"If you think we're less than perfect, then take a look in a mirror!" the madam shot back. "We are what you have made us. All my girls were abused and discarded by the likes of you, or worse," the madam spoke into the stillness. "Now they work for themselves."

"Not you?" Haakon asked skeptically.

"I provide a home for them, protection, and medical treatment, if necessary. They pay me a percentage of their earnings in return."

"Not a small percentage, I presume," Haakon ventured with a cynical smile.

"Less than half."

"So if I choose you, I get it for less than ten dinars?" Haakon asked, making John squirm in discomfort. He wished he weren't here.

“No. I don’t take customers,” she answered with her cold smile. “And one of the rules of my house is that any of my girls can say no to *any* customer without explanation—just as long as they earn enough each month to pay their keep. We’re not anybody’s *property* anymore.”

Haakon’s eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing and took a deep drink of ale. John was confused. He blurted out, “What do you mean?”

Her eyes shifted to John, and something in them softened. She cocked her head. “You look a little displaced among these hardened seamen, young man. Like a fish out of water, or should I say, a puppy at sea? That’s a silk shirt, isn’t it? With—” she stopped herself, frowning, “—aren’t those the arms of Ibelin?”

Damn it! John thought. Why hadn’t he thought to change into something less obvious?

Haakon laughed.

The madam glanced at him and then back at John. “You serve the Lord of Ibelin? I’d heard he came to Cyprus not long ago.”

“He doesn’t *serve* the Lord of Ibelin,” Haakon announced, clapping his arm over John’s shoulders as he bragged, “he *is* an Ibelin. His eldest son and heir, to be precise.”

The madam gave Haakon a look as if she didn’t believe him, and John felt he had to say something. “Right now I’m just a squire to Lord Aimery de Lusignan.”

The madam looked back at him and her eyebrows twitched. “I see,” she said, but John wasn’t sure if she believed them. He rather hoped she *didn’t* believe them, because he didn’t want his father hearing about this evening!

“John has never been in an establishment like this before,” Haakon admitted. “I brought him along as an interpreter, but I shouldn’t have . . . ” He looked over, considered John, and repeated, “I shouldn’t have.”

She nodded. “And yourself? Aspasia’s available.” As she spoke she gestured a girl over to their table.

Haakon looked at the girl, but shook his head. “She’s too young for me. I prefer older women. Women as cynical as me.”

“Too bad,” the madam retorted, standing and drawing Aspasia away with her. The girl glanced over her shoulder and flashed a smile at John.

“I like him!” she whispered to the madam with a giggle.

“Well, forget about him. He’s the heir to the Lord of Ibelin. The captain was wrong to bring him here, and he’s not likely to come

back.”

Chapter Twelve
Unhealed Wounds

Nicosia
October 1194

TWO WOMEN WERE ON THEIR KNEES with scrub brushes and a bucket of soapy water, while another two followed with mops to wipe up the dirt the first two scrubbed from the corners and cracks. Although she had been sent by Maria Zoë to see that they were doing a proper job, Beatrice was not without sympathy for the cleaning women. She knew exactly how hard it was to kneel on marble floors, and how your hands became cracked and raw from the soapy water. She knew, too, how the skirts of your dress became soaked and worn. It was only a little over two years since she had been doing the very same task. Just over two years ago, she had been a slave.

Most of the time she avoided thinking about the years in slavery, but that was not the same as escaping the consequences. Slavery had changed her as profoundly as it had changed her sons. It wasn't just a matter of learning hardship and humiliation—it had altered her entire value system. She simply did not value or covet the things she had thought were important "before." Instead, she appreciated the "luxury" of occasional idleness, of occasional privacy, of choosing her own food, of a pair of shoes. . . .

The experience, furthermore, set her apart from most of her peers, and it had made it impossible for her to completely reintegrate into Frankish society. That was the reason she preferred the reclusive life at Caymont over life at the court in Acre. In Caymont, Ibelin and his lady had welcomed her into their household for her father's sake, and respected her need to bury the past. Lady Eschiva of Lusignan had followed their example. In Acre, on the other hand, Isabella's ladies and Champagne's knights followed her with surreptitious glances and whispering. Everyone at court knew she had been repeatedly raped by Saracen soldiers before ending as a household scullery maid.

Cyprus, however, was proving an unsought surprise. To the Greek women she was a Frankish *lady*, a widow, and—more important—one who enjoyed the confidence of the Lady of Lusignan, not to mention

“the Comnena.” Three years ago she had not dared dream she would ever again wear silk, be shown respect, or be obeyed by even a child.

Nor had she dared to dream she might ever be reunited with her sons. Thus the sight of Amalric in chain mail, with a surcoat bearing the arms of Ibelin, still warmed her heart, no matter how often she saw him dressed like the squire he now was. She smiled unconsciously as he approached up the length of the long hall.

“Mother! I’ve been looking all over for you. We just got back from St. Hilarion,” her son exclaimed even before he reached her. His blond hair was wind-blown, and she noted with motherly pride that he had some almost invisible hairs on his chin.

“Was the castle all Lord Aimery promised it would be?” she asked, breathing in the masculine perfume of horse sweat, leather, and greased iron. These were the smells of knighthood, a status she had thought lost to her sons forever.

“The castle? Oh, yes, it was quite amazing,” Amalric admitted, before continuing—with a teenager’s carelessness of the impact of his words—“but Joscelyn, the idiot, went and broke his ankle doing some crazy thing outside the castle walls. We had to bring him back in a litter. The castle barber said he didn’t have the skills to reattach the ligaments. All he could do was stabilize the ankle, but he said if we don’t get the ligaments fixed, he’ll be a cripple the rest of his life.”

“Joscelyn?” Beatrice gasped. He was still her baby, although no one had ever hurt her more—not even the men who gleefully raped her and spat and kicked her when they finished. All her sons had seen it happen. It had broken Bart as much as her, and made him ashamed of them both. It had filled Amalric with rage, hatred, and a determination to avenge her. But Joscelyn had just been bewildered—until the Mamlukes convinced him his mother was “nothing but a whore” who deserved what she got. When Beatrice was reunited with Jos in Tyre, he had called her a whore to her face. Because his grandfather had taken a belt to his backside until it was too sore to sit on for a week, he’d never said the word aloud again. Yet she saw the word “whore” in his eyes every time he looked at her.

Amalric was still speaking. “It’s what he deserves for abjuring Christ—not to mention how he treats you! But I thought—”

“Don’t say that, Amalric. He’s still your brother, my son. Where is he?”

“I’ll take you to him. Ibelin has sent for the apothecary who tended King Guy.”

Joscelyn had been laid on a straw pallet on a rope bed. There was a pitcher of water on a small table beside him, and sunlight poured

through the open door from the courtyard. It made his tangle of blond hair seem like spun gold. He had dropped off to sleep from the exhaustion of the painful journey, but his face was pinched with pain nevertheless, and traces of tears streaked his face. He was still dressed in the dirty clothes he'd been wearing when the accident occurred. All the barber had done was to cut away the hose around the broken ankle, then bandage and splint the injury.

"Will you be all right for a moment, Mama?" Amalric asked, in a hurry to be gone. "I need to see to my lord's armor."

"Yes, I'll be fine," Beatrice answered as she sank down on the floor beside the bed and hesitantly reached out a hand to stroke her son's arm. Ever since they had been reunited, Joscelyn had angrily resisted her attempts to caress him. He said it was because he "wasn't a baby" anymore, but Beatrice suspected the real reason was that he didn't want to be touched by a "whore." Now he was too tired to feel her touch at all.

Beatrice sighed. She wanted to pray, but why should Christ help a boy who stubbornly refused to recognize Him? Every priest she had consulted agreed that Christ would forgive a seven-year-old for converting to Islam while in slavery. The problem was that he had not returned to the Church now that he was free. It was his stubborn insistence that they were all "polytheists" and that he alone had found truth through the prophet Mohammed that endangered his soul.

She found herself pleading with Christ to inspire her son to repent, but even as she prayed she believed it was hopeless. An open heart was the prerequisite of grace, and Joscelyn didn't have an open heart.

She did not know how long she sat there, lost in a vicious circle of doubt and confusion, before the light streaming through the door was cut off by a figure. Recognizing the doctor, Beatrice struggled to her feet as Andreas Katzouroubis swept into the little chamber in his red robes. "So, what have we here?" he asked as he came to stand beside the bed.

Beatrice stammered out that it was her son and that he had broken his ankle. The physician carefully drew back the blanket covering Jos' legs and examined the bandaged foot and ankle. He dropped on his heels and professionally removed the splint. Then, taking hold of the toe, he moved the foot from side to side, eliciting a gasp from Jos as he woke up.

"Who are you?" Jos demanded in outrage.

"A doctor," Katzouroubis answered simply. "How long ago did this happen?"

"It was dusk the day before yesterday," Jos told him.

“I have to remove the bandages to see the swelling and bruises,” the doctor announced.

Beatrice caught her breath, certain that this would be very painful, while Jos protested in a voice sharp with fear, “But the barber surgeon said the leg had to stay still or it would never heal! You’re *trying* to cripple me! You *hate* me because I’m Muslim!” Jos flung at the astonished doctor.

It was his fear speaking, Beatrice realized, and she reached out to put a hand on his shoulder to reassure him. Jos shook her hand off as if it burned him, casting her a look of sheer hatred. Wounded, Beatrice drew back in helpless despair.

Katzouroubis watched the little exchange with narrowed, intelligent eyes, and when he next spoke to his patient it was in Arabic, a tongue Beatrice had mastered during her years of slavery just as her son had. “You should be ashamed of yourself for treating your mother like that! Did not the Prophet, may Allah’s blessings be upon him always, teach us to respect our mothers?”

Jos’ eyes widened in astonishment, while Katzouroubis continued indignantly, “And why should I want to cripple you because of your faith? I had the honor to learn my trade in Baghdad with some of the greatest physicians of the Dar al-Islam. Now, to the matter at hand: the barber surgeon did the best he could to ensure there was no *more* damage, but he told the Lord of Ibelin that he believes all your ligaments have snapped, and unless we can sew them back together, you will never walk again. So you have a choice: either you let me examine that foot so, if the barber surgeon was right, I can fetch a skilled surgeon to sew the ligaments back together again, or you become a cripple.”

Jos’ face was flushed with fear of pain and confusion, but he swallowed and nodded.

“You want me to try to save your ankle?” Katzouroubis demanded confirmation.

Jos nodded.

“Then *first* you will apologize to your mother and beg her forgiveness.”

“But my mother is nothing but a Frankish whore—”

Katzouroubis slapped Jos so fast that neither Beatrice nor Jos saw it coming. Beatrice started to protest—to say that the insult was nothing new—but the doctor gestured her silent as he told Jos harshly, “You have no right to call your mother that! She is your mother. You owe her your life. Without her you would not exist. I will not help a boy who is so foolish as to insult and reject his mother—especially when

she is only trying to comfort him. The Koran teaches respect for mothers above all other women! If you do not respect your mother, you have no right to expect the benevolence of Allah, because you will have broken *His* law. We men of medicine can do our best, but it is always the will of Allah that prevails. You believe that, don't you?"

Jos nodded vigorously.

"Then you must do that which is pleasing to Him. A boy who does not respect his mother has a crippled and misshapen spirit, and it would be only justice if Allah allowed his body to reflect that inner imperfection. If you want His help, therefore, you must honor your mother by begging her forgiveness for your insults." When Jos hesitated, he added, "Now!"

Jos swallowed and snuck a glance at his mother.

Beatrice held her breath in fear of Jos' response. The boy looked back at the doctor, his expression more confused than defiant.

"Apologize to your mother and promise you will never insult her again, or I will let you become a cripple in body to match your crippled spirit," Katzouroubis insisted firmly.

Jos looked at his mother again, and said in a soft and contrite Arabic, "I'm sorry, mother."

Beatrice wanted to fling her arms around him and shower him with kisses, but she did not trust this truce and feared an exuberant response would reawaken his resistance. Instead, she just nodded as tears started to trickle down her face.

"Good," Katzouroubis nodded his approval to Jos, "and now promise you will never insult her again," he insisted.

Jos took a deep breath, swallowed, and said in a soft voice, "I promise I will never insult you again."

Beatrice started sobbing, while Katzouroubis simply said "good" and got to work removing the splint and efficiently unraveling the bandages.

Jos tensed and gritted his teeth as the first jarring pain stabbed him. Beatrice risked reaching out a hand to steady him, expecting him to shake it off, but Jos did not. With a flood of gratitude toward the doctor and God, Beatrice sat on the head of the bed and put her arms around her son. She held him against her as he gasped and stiffened in response to the increasing pain.

By the time the doctor finished, Jos' face was wet with tears, and he clung to his mother's arm as if were a lifeline. As Katzouroubis moved the foot clinically by the toe from side to side and forward and back, Jos' fingers dug deep into his mother's arm as he writhed in pain. He was grinding his teeth together to stop any sound from coming out.

Katzouroubis finished his examination, stood upright, and announced to Beatrice rather than Jos, “He must be operated on as soon as possible. I know a very good surgeon. I will fetch him. We’ll need to sedate your son, however. This will be very painful.”

Beatrice nodded.

Katzouroubis redirected his focus to Jos and said, “This is the only way we can save you from being a cripple, young man. Be thankful there is a surgeon here in Nicosia that has done this kind of operation before, and be thankful your mother is with you.”

Jos didn’t answer—he just closed his eyes, still oozing tears, and laid his head on his mother’s breast. Beatrice didn’t dare move, although she was sitting awkwardly on one folded leg and the circulation to it was cut off. With one hand she gently stroked the tears from Jos’ face, while she gave thanks to Christ for the privilege of holding him like this. She had not held him in her arms since he had been torn from them in the slave market in Damascus. Now it was almost as if he were that little six-year-old again. Except he was so heavy. . . .

Within the hour Katzouroubis was back, accompanied by a stocky man with a square face and stubby fingers. The surgeon spoke no French at all, and only nodded briefly to Beatrice before he rolled up his sleeves and started laying out his instruments on the little table.

Beatrice felt Jos tense in her arms, and the terror on his face was so eloquent that she almost asked the surgeon to go away. Katzouroubis, however, came over and patted her shoulder. “It’s time for you to leave him with us, Madame,” he told her in French. “I have a very potent sedative.”

Beatrice nodded, but countered, “I’ll stay at least until he’s asleep.”

“Very well, but we’ll need some wine—”

“I don’t drink wine,” Jos protested, rubbing away the tears pouring from his nose with the back of his hand.

Katzouroubis snorted. “We’ll see about that. Bring me both water and wine, Madame.”

Beatrice reluctantly withdrew, hobbling on the leg that had gone to sleep. A part of her was terrified that by leaving she would break the spell, and Jos would reject her again when she returned. She hurried to the kitchen and was received there by a flutter of agitation. The new kitchen staff was eager to prove they were efficient. They shooed her out with assurances that the wine and water would be brought to her shortly.

She hurried back, relieved by their diligence, as it shortened the

time she was separated from Jos. As she re-entered, the boy cast her a look of relief and almost desperate welcome. The enchantment hadn't broken! She sat again on the head of the bed and took him back into her arms. He was trembling with fear.

The water and wine arrived, and the doctor poured water into a pottery goblet, added a powdered mixture into the water, and brought it over to Jos. "Here."

Jos brought it to his lips but then he drew back, making a face and holding his breath. "That smells vile!" he told the doctor in outrage.

"It does, doesn't it?" Katzouroubis answered. "Now, you should know as well as I do that the Koran explicitly allows wine if it is necessary for one's health. This is one of those times."

Jos took a deep breath and nodded assent. The doctor returned to the table and mixed the powder into red wine. He brought this to Jos, and the boy reluctantly but dutifully took one sip at a time until he had drained the goblet to the last dregs. By then he had already stopped trembling and his breathing was becoming deeper, his pulse slower. "Everything's going to be fine, Jos," Beatrice assured him, bending to kiss his forehead under the tousled hair. (How often had she longed to do that in the last seven years?)

"Help me, Mama. Please. Help me." The words were just a whisper, and Jos's arms were too weak to hold her, but he had chained her to him: these were the words he had screamed in terror as the slave trader tore him out of her arms. She had tried to cling to him, but the men in the market had closed in around her, kicking her legs out from under her and then kicking her in the gut, the back, the head, and the breast until the slave trader himself called them off. When he yanked her back onto her feet, bleeding from her nose, half crippled from the pain in her ribs and her kidneys, the man who had pulled six-year-old Jos after him by ropes around the child's wrists was nowhere to be seen. She had not seen Jos again until she arrived in Tyre after the Truce of Ramla.

"I really don't think you should stay, Madame," Katzouroubis told her soberly. "This is going to be a very delicate operation, and there is going to be a lot of blood."

"I don't care," Beatrice told him softly, smiling down at the sleeping boy in her arms. "You can blindfold me if you like, but I want to stay here holding him."

"Hmm." Katzouroubis took a deep breath and then nodded. "Then at least close your eyes, Madame."

"No, I'll just focus on Jos," she told him.

With another sigh and a shake of his head the doctor turned his

attention to supporting the surgeon, who was ready to proceed.

The operation took a long time. The sunlight stopped flooding the little room as the sun moved westward, and the temperature grew chilly. The doctor and surgeon spoke only Greek to one another, which was just as well, since that way Beatrice could not tell exactly what they were doing. She was conscious only that the surgeon gave the orders, and that the learned doctor responded by bringing tweezers and clamps, string, or gauze as required. The physician also daubed away the blood again and again, throwing the bloody rags away to apply more until there was a heap of bloody gauze near the door. Finally he laid cobwebs into the wound, and then bandaged it up again and replaced the splints.

"We have done the best we can," he assured Beatrice, washing his hands clean in a bowl of water as the surgeon packed away his instruments. "Only time will tell if it was adequate."

"How long before he wakes?" Beatrice asked, gently extricating herself and stretching her cramped muscles.

"I expect it will be three or four hours, maybe even six. He needs the sleep, and when he comes to he will be in acute pain. I have left two doses of painkiller on the table. Mix them with a large glass of wine and give him something light to eat. No fat, no meat or fish, just bread and something fresh: figs are very good, grapes, or plums."

Beatrice nodded; she thanked the physician profusely and the surgeon, too. The latter nodded matter-of-factly and seemed in a hurry to go, but Beatrice clung to Katzouroubis' hand. "What you said to him, sir, about respecting his mother—how can I ever thank you? I mean, it wasn't the first time it was said to him—my father and the Lord of Ibelin both punished him for insulting me—but it never had any effect before."

Katzouroubis squeezed her hand and smiled at her. "Sometimes, Madame, it is only when we are facing a new crisis that we go back into our inner souls and discover ourselves. Your son, perhaps, blamed you for something?" He raised his eyebrows a fraction, and Beatrice caught her breath. "I'm not saying you *were* to blame, Madame," the doctor continued—"in fact, I'm almost certain you weren't—but is it possible that something you did made him *so* angry that he hated you? It was surely hate that made him call you the worst name he could think of. All I did was remind him of the essentials: whatever you did, you are still his mother, and every religion in the world calls on children to honor their parents. That is not a monopoly of Christianity. His conversion to Islam in slavery—I presume that's what it was?" Beatrice nodded. "Could it have been his way of punishing you for not protecting him from that very fate? But you see Islam, too,

teaches sons to respect and honor their mothers above all other women. By reminding him of that, I yanked away his crutch—and his weapon. I simply showed him that he cannot use Islam to punish you, because Islam demands that he honor you. Now, try to get some rest, Madame. I'll come again tomorrow to check up on him."

But Beatrice couldn't possibly rest. What the doctor said made sense, and it filled her with hope. It wasn't the Mamlukes who had turned Jos against her—or rather, they had succeeded only because he was already filled with fury because she had "let" him be taken from her. She had not wanted to. She had been as helpless as he—but to a six-year-old, who had seen her as all-powerful until then, it must have *felt* like betrayal or abandonment. And now? She had to rebuild his trust by explaining the reality of her own weakness. For the first time since she had been confronted by Jos's conversion and hostility, she began to hope that she could win him back.

Chapter Thirteen
An Eye for an Eye . . .

Nicosia
Late January 1195

A CROWD HAD GATHERED IN THE street before the palace. Angry voices were raised and fists were being shaken. “What are they shouting?” Dick asked John anxiously. The two squires waited by the gate to admit the knights who pushed their way through the crowd outside.

“Just crude insults, for the most part,” John answered, more unsettled than he wanted to admit. Although there had been sporadic and localized violence and unrest ever since he’d come to Cyprus, most had occurred in the outlying regions, such as Karpas or the region between Famagusta and Larnaka. The capital had generally remained calm. Certainly, angry crowds had never assembled in front of the palace like this before.

“What sort of insults?” Dick pressed him.

“Bastards, cutthroats, godless whoresons, blasphemers—I think.” John fell silent as he peered through the crack in the door to judge the progress of the party of roughly twenty horsemen making their way through the outraged mob.

The approaching men were all armored, and wore helmets on their heads to cover their faces in shadow if not behind visors; they were and acted immune to the violence around them. The horses, on the other hand, were visibly unnerved. They fretted, shaking their heads, dancing sideways to avoid this or the other loud noise or sudden gesture. Now and again one swung his haunches around and kicked out. That frightened the crowd back for a few moments.

At last they were close enough for John and Dick to act. With a nod of agreement, they sprang forward to pull open the wings of the gate. At the sight of the yawning opening, the lead riders spurred their mounts forward. The unnerved horses leapt forward, as eager as their riders to escape the mob. In less than a minute, the entire column of knights had clattered into the cobbled courtyard. Dick and John slammed the gate shut and barricaded it against the mob. The latter

rushed the gate too late and found themselves pounding on the iron-studded oak, screaming more loudly than ever before.

The gate secure, the two squires turned their attention to the men who had just arrived. They were jumping down from their sweated and dusty mounts, shoving their helmets up off their red and perspiring faces. They talked among themselves in angry, agitated tones, cursing the crowds and grumbling about orders not to draw their weapons. John and Dick ignored the bulk of them and made for the two leaders: John's cousin Henri de Brie and Reynald Barlais.

The men were almost a comedy of contrasts: Barlais short, stocky, and round-faced, Sir Henri tall but with a gaunt face and a nose that fell straight from his forehead like the nose guard of a helmet.

"We heard Lusignan was back," Sir Henri tossed in John's direction as the latter came up beside him to take his horse. Aimery and the Ibelins had spent the Christmas season in Caymont and had only returned to Cyprus two days earlier.

"Yes, my lord," John answered respectfully, while his cousin lifted the saddle flap to loosen his horse's girth.

"We need to see him right away. Someone else can see to my horse. Take us to him immediately," Sir Henri ordered, flipping the reins over the horse's head and handing them off to one of his knights.

John nodded to Dick, who had hold of Barlais' horse, and led his cousin and Barlais under the arcade surrounding the courtyard, through a passageway to a walled garden, and from here up an exterior stairway that brought them to a gallery. John's feet were light on the checkerboard of brown and white tiles, but behind him the boots of his companions pounded heavily and in accidental unison. To John it sounded like an ominous drumbeat.

At the tall arched door to the anteroom of Aimery's suite of rooms, John knocked and then entered to announce: "My lords of Karpas and Kyrenia, my lord." Both titles were self-appropriated by Henri de Brie and Barlais, respectively. No one had formally invested them with the titles—certainly not Aimery—but he had given them the task of establishing "authority" over the respective regions.

Aimery had been dictating a letter to the Pope, his secretary hunched over a writing pulpit and scratching away furiously with a quill pen to try to keep up with the flood of words—frequently interrupted, corrected, and started over. "*Who* did you say?" Aimery asked his squire, frowning at the interruption.

The door was pushed open, and Sir Henri and Barlais surged past and around John to stand before Aimery with their arms akimbo. "Don't act so surprised!" Barlais growled.

“You’re right,” Aimery retorted, with a wave in the direction of the windows from which the dull roar of the agitated crowd still seeped into the room. “I should have known you two would be the cause of any riot! What have you done now?”

“We’ve got the ringleaders,” Sir Henri answered with evident satisfaction.

Aimery looked surprised. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Sir Henri insisted. “I’d been suspicious for months, but a week ago I finally found a treacherous weasel willing to puke out the whole story for a laughable reward of a herd of sheep—and the grazing rights, of course.”

Not willing to let Henri de Brie take all the credit, Barlais growled, “I’d had men watching them for weeks. A nest of vipers, that’s what they are. It would have been better to smash their heads with our heels immediately, but Karpas here” (he too used the title that Henri had expropriated for himself, in a tone that seemed to say, “I’ll call you this because you want me to, but don’t think I don’t know you made it up”) “insisted that we arrest them instead. He thought they might be persuaded to identify their friends and allies.”

Sir Henri smiled. “I did suggest that. You’d be surprised how easy it is to make men squeal—particularly when they aren’t hardened fighting men, but monks—”

“Monks? You didn’t arrest monks?” Aimery asked, aghast.

“Of course we did!” Barlais barked back. “We have evidence they are the men behind all the unrest. Everything points to them! Like the spider spins a web, they sat up on their mountaintop at Antiphonitis and cast their web of protest and revolt across the whole island.”

“Just how many monks did you arrest?” Aimery demanded.

“Not many,” Henri assured him in a calming tone.

“Seven and the abbot—he’s the real ringleader, of course,” Barlais added more precisely. “And a slimier snake you could not imagine! All pious pose and poison!” he spat out the last.

“Arresting monks is not going to make us popular!” Lord Aimery retorted angrily. “No wonder there’s a riot out there!” He gestured again to the window.

“Who gives a damn about being popular?” Barlais snarled back. “It’s better to be feared than loved! Love is as fickle as a woman. Fear, on the other hand, is what these people understand. It’s how Isaac Comnenus ruled.”

“And how he lost the island to Richard of England, too! No one was willing to raise a finger in his defense. They all came running to offer

the English King their fealty."

"We don't need them to lift a finger to defend us! We can damn well defend ourselves," Brie retorted. "But with this viperous abbot and his sanctimonious apostles in a dungeon, the attacks against us will soon stop!"

"It doesn't sound that way to me." Aimery nodded again toward the undiminished sounds of men shouting insults and threats.

"Oh, just give them time. Without their leaders to rile them up, they'll soon calm down," Henri assured him confidently.

"Where have you put them?" Aimery wanted to know.

"The dungeon at Kyrenia—where it's dank, dark, and smelly," Barlais declared smugly. "Lots of rats down there, too, and no windows. It's under water, actually. If they try to dig their way out, they'll drown."

Aimery knew more than he wanted to about dungeons; he'd spent far too much time in them himself. He asked instead with raised eyebrows, "And now?"

"We let them rot for a bit and then see how willing they are to talk to us about their accomplices and how they are going to publicly submit to us. Sir Henri's—sorry, *my lord of Karpas*'—'sharper' methods may not be necessary. I say a week with only foul water and no food in the damp cold will make them grovel at our feet like we were the second coming of Christ."

Aimery stared at the two men before him with narrowed eyes. He didn't like what they had done. To be sure, he'd long had his own suspicions against the Orthodox clergy on the island. The Templars had heaped angry abuse on them for their "stubbornness" and "wiles." Likewise, the Dowager Queen had been saying ever since she arrived that the clergy was the key. While she urged approaching them to effect reconciliation, her stand nevertheless gave credence to these accusations. And if Aimery had no reason to think this particular abbot was at the heart of things, there was also no reason to assume he was innocent, either.

But arresting men of the cloth was always dangerous. The murderers of the Archbishop of Canterbury had intended only to arrest him, and had been provoked into the horrifying murder of an archbishop in his own cathedral by Becket's stubborn refusal to comply. If these Greek monks died—even if it was from cold and hunger rather than from torture or execution—they would *still* be declared martyrs. And everyone involved in their arrest would find themselves cursed, if not by God then by the people of the island.

The problem was that Aimery was not certain Barlais would obey

him if he ordered the immediate release of the monks and their abbot. Furthermore, the damage had already been done. Would anyone in the crowd outside seriously believe he was not behind it? That it had been done without his knowledge and consent? No. They called Barlais and Brie "Lusignan's wolves." They all thought these men did his bidding.

"Still no word from your brother Geoffrey?" Barlais broke into his thoughts, evidently getting impatient with the silence.

Aimery answered defensively, "We've had word he's *not* coming. He has rejected—renounced—the inheritance."

"So your tame *Norseman* says," Barlais scoffed, adding, "I want more proof than that."

"Then you'll have to wait. The Genoese ship he entrusted with his written response won't be here until the next sailing season."

"Well, don't get too comfortable in your pretty palace!" Barlais sneered, with a contemptuous glance at the luxury around him. "Your brother may be here *before* his messenger!" Then he turned on his heel and stormed out.

Brie waited until Barlais was out of hearing before remarking in a bemused tone, "I don't share Barlais' conviction about your brother, but I support this arrest, Aimery. I tell you, the Greek Church is behind all this opposition. They feed the people lies about us: say we'll increase the taxes, reduce them all to slavery, force them to drink blood instead of wine, and God knows what more."

Aimery sighed, and when he spoke his voice was both tired and irritable. "Maybe, but by arresting their monks we only give credence to their lies. It makes us appear opposed to their Church, and we're *not*. Holy Cross! Muslims, Jews, and Samaritans—let alone Armenian, Jacobite, Maronite, and Coptic Christians—were all good subjects of the Crown of Jerusalem. A more or less homogenous population of Greek Orthodox subjects ought to be far less troublesome."

"Ought to be, perhaps, but they aren't proving to be. The situation isn't getting any better, Aimery. If you don't come up with a strategy to get control of this island soon, you're going to lose it—just as the Templars did—whether Geoffrey comes back or not." With a sarcastic bow to Aimery and a nod and a wink for John, Sir Henri also withdrew.

Early February 1195

Master Afanas was the best ivory carver in Nicosia. Although he worked predominantly in wood, his workshop also produced magnificent ivory inlays. He had a large workshop near the Kyrenia gate, and he frequently received commissions for altar screens, choir stalls, and other furniture for churches and monasteries. The work with inlaid ivory, on the other hand, was rare, small scale, and usually for the Italians.

It was, Lakis reminded himself, a privilege to learn your trade under such a master. But as an orphan, Lakis had no contract. He'd obtained his position by showing the master the combs and buckles he'd made from bone, and Master Afanas had been interested enough to agree to take him on under conditions that Lakis increasingly saw as slavery.

To be sure, he was allowed to sleep in the workshop, which wasn't bad since the wood shavings made a sweet-smelling, soft bed, and he was given the same hearty midday meal provided all the apprentices. But that was where "remuneration" ended. Lakis received no pocket money for baths, clothes, or wine. Since he had no home at which to obtain breakfast or dinner, he was almost always hungry. Worst of all, he could not sell what he produced, because "the Master" had the right to everything made in the workshop.

Work started early, ended late, and was accompanied by what seemed like constant criticism from Master Afanas combined with sneering and heckling from the other apprentices, all of whom felt themselves better than "the beggar." Sometimes their insults and jokes inspired Lakis to work harder and be better—but sometimes, like tonight, they just made him miserable and tired. One of them had "accidentally" knocked over the little chest of drawers he'd been working on for two weeks and it lay on the floor, a heap of broken pieces.

Master Afanas had hit the boy responsible with his stick and vowed to deduct the cost of the materials from his allowance as he chased him and the others home for the night. But the chest was still ruined, and two weeks of work had been for nothing.

"Don't look so broken-hearted," Master Afanas advised in a businesslike tone. "Your work wasn't *that* good. Hopefully your next try will be better. You certainly aren't going to be entrusted with any ivory if you can't do better than that." He indicated the broken box with a dismissive gesture. "I told you when I took you on that you had just one year to start producing things I can sell to real customers. You've only got until Christmas to meet my standards. After that you're back out with your friends behind the abattoir!"

"I don't have any friends!" Lakis shot back at him, hardening his feelings.

“No wonder, either! Sullen little brat that you are. I don’t doubt your last master ran you out for being impudent and rude! I didn’t ask any questions when I took you on—but believe me, if I hear something that makes you a liability, you’re out on your ear! Now clean up that mess and bar the door after me. I’m late for dinner as it is.”

The Master was out the door, leaving Lakis behind feeling sorry for himself as he squatted down beside the wreck of his masterpiece and started picking up the pieces. He had been so proud of it. He had thought it was up to Master Afanas’ standards. He’d pictured it in an apothecary, filled with precious drugs, or maybe adorning a lady’s table, holding beautiful jewels.

Tears started to well in his eyes, and to defeat them he deflected his emotions into rage. He threw the pieces across the room and screamed “Damn you! Damn you!” Only he didn’t know who he was damning: Master Afanas, his fellow apprentices, or the Franks who had killed his parents and left him an orphan.

The thought of the Franks, however, reminded him of Janis. He had almost been a friend. At least he’d been *friendly*, but Lakis had sensed something was fishy right from the start. Lakis had suspected he was the son or servant of an Italian merchant. But then, months after their last meeting, he’d caught sight of someone who looked like Janis all dressed up in fine Frankish clothes and riding a beautiful horse beside one of the Frankish lords. He hadn’t wanted to believe it, so he had started lurking around the palace. Sure enough, “Janis” came and went with easy familiarity, although he lived in the khan opposite. By asking around a little, Lakis soon discovered that the man Janis was usually beside was none other than Aimery de Lusignan, the brother of the tyrant himself. Then the tyrant died (terribly, it was said), and now this Aimery de Lusignan had taken over as tyrant.

It made Lakis sick and angry that Janis was one of them, but it was also Janis who had suggested he apprentice to a real carver. Angry as Lakis was, he still recognized that he’d learned a huge amount in the last ten months. Even if Master Afanas threw him out, he’d be better able to fend for himself.

With a deep sigh of resignation, he went and barred the door, then collected the broken remnants of his box and carried them over to the fireplace. A low fire burned there day and night, fed just enough discarded, unsuitable, and remnant wood to keep it from going out and so keep the chill off the air. With great solemnity Lakis fed the shattered pieces of his masterpiece into the fire and watched them burn, one piece at a time. In the flames he imagined his father’s mill burning.

He hadn't actually seen it burn, because he'd been sent up to the brothers of Antiphonitis to ask for help before the Franks set fire to it. The brothers had not allowed him to go down the hill for weeks afterwards. Nor had they allowed him to see the remains of his parents and sisters. They had put the bodies in a coffin and nailed it shut before they let him near it. It had smelled so terrible he had gagged and backed away. The brothers had comforted him, and now they *too* were in the hands of the Franks. Some said they had been put into a dark hole to starve, and others said they were already martyrs, crucified just like Christ. Lakis didn't know what to think.

A loud pounding at the door made him jump clear out of his skin. He sprang to his feet and called in a voice high with alarm: "Who's there? What do you want? We're closed!"

"Lakis!" The voice was low, unfamiliar but urgent.

"Yes, I'm called Lakis," the orphan answered sullenly, going closer to the door to stand in front of it, arms crossed stubbornly. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"It's me, Brother Zotikos! From Antiphonitis. Let me in!" The man had dropped his voice to nearly a whisper.

Lakis was terrified. Had he conjured up the dead? Summoning all his courage, he declared to the closed door as forcefully as possible: "Brother Zotikos is in a Frankish dungeon! Whoever you are, go away!"

"Lakis, listen! I can't shout or it will attract attention. Father Eustathios and seven of my brothers were arrested, but I wasn't at Antiphonitis when the Franks came. I'm still free. Let me in. I need your help!"

Lakis couldn't deny help to Brother Zotikos. He lifted the bar holding the door shut, and cracked the door open. In the darkness he saw only a monk in black robes looking anxiously over his shoulder. Then the monk turned toward the door and his dark eyes fixed on Lakis. He gasped. It was Brother Zotikos—but rather than the mild and kindly man that he had been at the monastery, he looked fierce and sinister.

Lakis backed up, opening the door only a little wider. The monk squeezed himself inside. Lakis shut the door and replaced the bar. Brother Zotikos waited for him. When they were facing one another again, the monk explained, "Your uncle told me you had run away; he wanted us to track you down and return you to him."

"Is that why you're here?" Lakis asked, disappointed and betrayed.

"No, I found you months ago; but since you seemed to have landed on your feet and not to be in need of your uncle's care, I decided to

leave you here."

Lakis let out a slow sigh of relief. He did not want to return to his uncle, no matter what.

"Lakis, listen to me. I dare not stay in Nicosia very long, but I need someone—you—to deliver a package to that dog Lusignan."

"Me? Why me? I don't have anything to do with the despot!"

"I know. You're a good boy. But this message is, well, a warning—to stop the Franks from doing any harm to Father Eustathios. I'm very worried that the Franks could torture or kill him. We have to stop that if we can."

"Of course, but how? People say he may already be dead."

"No, he's not. I've checked on that. He and my brothers were taken to the Castle of Kyrenia, but the—ah—" he interrupted himself, cleared his throat, and continued "*women* who have, um, dealings with the garrison have been able to discover that they are being kept in the underwater dungeon. They are being given water and bread, and that is all, but so far none of them have died. We have to ensure they get better conditions soon. You know how old and ill most of my brothers are."

"But how can I help?" Lakis wanted to know.

"It is better if you don't know the details, but in this box is a message for the tyrant Lusignan." From a satchel he had been carrying over his shoulder, Brother Zotikos removed a beautiful carved wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"Oh, that's beautiful!" Lakis exclaimed, for an instant the craftsman in him overcoming everything else as he reached out to it in wonder.

"Don't open it!" Brother Zotikos warned just as Lakis went to flip open the tiny brass latch holding the box shut.

Lakis looked up at him, alarmed.

"What's inside is for the Frankish dogs only! You must deliver it to *them*—as a gift." The way Brother Zotikos smiled as he spoke sent a shiver down Lakis' spine. "Will you do it?"

"But—I mean—how am I going to get past their guards?"

"You sell carved objects, don't you? You make and sell them? Everyone in Nicosia knows that. The Franks will have seen you hawking your wares all over the city."

Lakis looked down at the box in the palms of his hand and shook his head. "I've never even *seen* anything as beautiful as this. No one will think I made it. Where is it from?"

"It comes from a land beyond Arabia. You don't have to pretend *you* made it. Say your master made it and has sent you to deliver it. We

must get it to the Lusignan." There was desperation in Brother Zotikos' voice, while his eyes burned almost feverishly. Or maybe he *was* feverish, thought Lakis, as the monk continued in a low, breathy voice: "I am certain God whispered your name to me, Lakis. I came to Nicosia with this mission, but without knowing how I was going to perform it. Then God whispered your name to me, and I remembered you were here, apprenticed to a master carver. I knew you were the one chosen by Him to deliver this box, this message. If you refuse, Lakis, you are not only being ungrateful for all Father Eustathios and my brothers did for you when you were orphaned, you will also be defying the will of God."

Lakis stared at Brother Zotikos, hypnotized by his words, and a chill ran down his spine, making him shudder. Truly, he thought, only God could know that he *did* have a "friend" in the tyrant's own household: his "friend" Janis. He nodded solemnly. "I'll deliver the box, Brother Zotikos—if I can convince Master Afanas to give me some time off, that is," he added uncertainly as he tried to rehearse what he would say.

Brother Zotikos reached out his hand in blessing. "God will reward you, Lakis!" He made the sign of the cross, then bent and kissed Lakis on both cheeks. "Tell your master it is the anniversary of your parents' death and that you wish to attend Mass and pray for their souls. No Master would deny you time to do that."

Lakis nodded solemnly. He had to find a way to do what Brother Zotikos said. It was not often that an orphan-turned-beggar-turned-apprentice was tasked directly by God.

"There's a disreputable Greek youth outside asking to see you, sir," the sergeant of the guard told John, catching him as he returned from putting his and his father's horses up in the stables.

"Me?"

"Well, he said 'Janis, the despot's servant,' and I don't know who else he would have meant."

John's heart missed a beat. It had to be Lakis! "Where is he?"

"I told him to wait on the other side of the street by the khan you used to live in. I didn't want him accosting people or trying to slip inside. You can't trust these Greeks, sir. They're all slippery as eels—liars and cheats at best and outright rebels at worst. If you want me to come with you—"

"No, I'll be fine!" John insisted, and hastened back out onto the

street. He didn't spot Lakis right away because he was sitting on the ground with his back against the side of the khan. As John approached, Lakis got cautiously to his feet. He had grown inches, and although he was still thin, he was somehow less feral-looking than the last time they'd met.

"Lakis! It *is* you!" John exclaimed, grinning broadly.

Lakis did not return his smile. He gazed at John with piercing eyes and an earnest expression. "You lied to me," Lakis opened the conversation.

"I—"John's smile faded. "I had to. I was in disguise. I wanted to get to know Nicosia without anyone knowing who I was. I wanted, for a little while, *not* to be a Frank."

"Why?" Lakis demanded.

John took a deep breath and tried to think through his answer very carefully. "Because I knew that if everyone saw me as a Frank, I wouldn't get to know the real Nicosia or have an honest conversation with anyone. That's true, isn't it?"

"But why did you care?"

"My mother's Greek," John answered with a shrug. "I don't hate Greeks."

That took Lakis by surprise. He started, frowned, and looked at John harder than before. He'd heard that one of the Franks was married to a Comnena, but John had been there before the Comnena arrived with her Frankish husband. Surely he couldn't be related. "You're not—I mean, you can't . . . "

"What?" John asked back, baffled. "What's so strange about having a Greek mother? Many of us born here in Outremer are of mixed blood. Queen Melisende was half Armenian—"

"But not the Comnena? Your mother isn't the Comnena?" Lakis broke in, sounding desperate for reassurance that this wasn't the case.

"What's wrong with that?" John asked back irritably. He was proud of his mother's blood.

Lakis crossed himself and started to back away.

John reached out and grabbed him to stop him from escaping again. "Lakis, what is it? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Lakis froze. He had been raised to think of the Emperors as semi-divine. His father had taught him that: no matter how unjust Isaac Comnenus had seemed, he was still a member of the Imperial family and, and, and . . . now a member of that family was touching him. Lakis stared at John's hand on his arm.

John instantly let him go, but he pleaded with him. "Lakis, I'm sorry

for what some of the Franks have done. I told my mother about you and how your parents and sisters had been killed. I think that's one of the reasons she's here. She wants to stop this violence—"

"By arresting monks and abbots?" Lakis flung at him.

John took a breath to answer and then just shook his head. "No. That's wrong. My mother has told Lord Aimery that it was a terrible mistake. Even Lord Aimery recognizes that it is wrong, but . . . " John cut himself off, realizing he had been on the brink of revealing the internal divisions in the Frankish leadership. Instinctively he knew it would not be good to talk openly about them. "Listen to me, Lakis. Despite what has happened, we aren't monsters and blasphemers and all the other things you call us. Let's go someplace where we can talk. I'll buy—"

"No! I have to get back to my master. I'm an apprentice now," Lakis told him proudly. "With a wood and ivory carver. I only came to tell you that—and to give you this." He thrust out the box from Brother Zotikos, at the same time taking a step back in preparation for flight.

John stared at the beautiful box, and he knew instinctively that whatever it contained was evil. "What is it, Lakis?" he asked in a low, serious voice.

"A gift."

"But from whom? And why?"

"My master wants commissions from Lord Aimery or his lady. He sent me to bring you this box to show you what good work he does. Give it to Lord Aimery—and if he wants more, come find me in the workshop beside the Paphos gate." He gave a completely wrong address, in the certainty that the Franks would soon want to kill whoever had delivered the box.

John saw through the lie, but he also had no compelling reason to reject the box. To buy time and to think things through, he cautiously flipped open the little latch to look inside the box. As he did so, Lakis darted away as fast as his feet could carry him. Distracted and dismayed, John started after him—then, realizing it was pointless, he stopped and looked down into the box.

A crumpled cloth or rag covered with dark brown stains was all there was inside. Frowning, John started to extract the rag. It was stiff, and the brown stains started to flake off as he touched the cloth. John froze and pulled his hand away. He couldn't be sure, but he strongly suspected the stains were dried blood. But whose?

John snapped the box closed and ran to the palace. He didn't stop until he had reached his parents' apartment. He knocked once on the door, but didn't wait to be invited in. "Mama! Papa!"

They were seated opposite each other in the window seat, his father with a goblet of water in his hand, having just returned with John from a morning ride around the city to assess the situation. He looked up sharply and met John's eyes. One look at his son was enough to make him get to his feet and step down from the window seat. He was already tense and wary.

John crossed the distance with the box in his hands. "Papa, this was just delivered—a "gift" to Lord Aimery. But—look inside!"

Balian took the box from John cautiously, his eyes looking at his son's ashen face more than the box. He flipped the latch and slowly opened the lid. John watched him closely, but his father's face was guarded. He studied the contents and then put a finger inside to shove the cloth aside, and with his fingernail extracted a note lying on the bottom of the box. He removed the note, but it was in Greek, so he handed it to his wife, who was hovering beside him. Then he reached inside the box again and pulled out a heavy gold ring.

"All it says is: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. . . .'" Maria Zoë informed him.

Balian was turning the ring over in his hand, frowning. It was a man's ring, large enough for him to wear on his thumb. It had an exceptionally large, irregular stone set in heavy gold. The style was quite exotic—neither Frankish nor Greek, more oriental, although nothing on it was overtly Islamic such as an Arabic inscription. He felt as if he'd seen this ring somewhere before, but he couldn't place it. Holding it up, he asked his wife, "Do you recognize this or know to whom it might have belonged?"

Maria Zoë gasped. "That's Humphrey de Toron's ring! The one he inherited from his grandfather the Constable. It was too big for his fingers, so he used to wear it on a chain around his neck."

"Of course!" Now Balian recognized it, too. "It was a gift from the Caliph of Cairo! Given to the Constable when he negotiated with him in the 60s."

Balian and Maria Zoë's eyes met.

"Humphrey de Toron?" John asked anxiously. "You think he's dead?"

Maria Zoë shook her head sharply. "Not unless the abbot of Antiphonitis is. I think we can assume, however, that the rebels have poor Humphrey in their power, and his fate depends on how we treat the abbot and monks of Antiphonitis."

"Who gave you this?" Balian asked his son intently.

John drew a deep breath to lie, but he couldn't. "Do you remember the orphaned beggar I told you about? The one whose parents were

killed by Henri de Brie—burned alive in their own mill? He—he—please don't go after him!"

"No, there's no need. What you said is enough. He has reason to hate us, and he's probably active in the rebellion, which confirms what this is: a clear threat to Toron. Where was Toron last we heard?"

"Paphos," Maria Zoë answered. "In the West," she answered her husband's question before it formed; "Aimery sent him to demand salvage from that pilgrim ship and see if he could find out what had happened to the survivors. It seemed an easy enough job, as there has been no open rebellion or unrest in the region."

"And Toron, of course, doesn't inspire fear," Balian noted cynically. Then, taking a deep breath, he announced: "Come with me, John. We need to take this to Aimery."

Aimery turned the ring around in his hand and considered it with narrowed eyes for what seemed like an inordinately long time, before setting it down on the beautiful mosaic table in front of him and declaring with a nod, "This is a very good turn of events."

"Aimery! How can you say that?" Eschiva exclaimed in outrage. "Have you forgotten that poor Humphrey backed the Lusignans when the rest of the High Court would not? You can't still begrudge him the better treatment he received from Saladin! He's suffered. . . ." The flood of words died on Eschiva's lips as she realized that Aimery was nodding calmly to everything she said. Falling silent, she looked nervously to her uncle and aunt. The two were waiting alertly for her husband to continue, rather than joining in her protests. She didn't understand.

"It's very simple, my dear," Aimery explained once she fell silent. "*This*," he took the ring in his fingers and held it up again, "gives me the excuse I need to order Barlais to improve the conditions in which the abbot and his monks are held. Obviously, we can't and won't release them until we can be sure Toron's kidnappers will release him in exchange, but it gives me an excuse to enter into negotiations with the rebels. Not even your nephew could object to us talking with the rebels now, could he?" The question was directed at Balian.

Balian shook his head. "No, Henri wouldn't insist on putting Toron's life at risk."

"Good. I don't think Barlais will, either." Aimery turned to his wife and assured her, "I'll order the abbot and his monks confined in more humane conditions until we can find out where Toron is and who is

holding him." Then he focused again on Balian and Maria, his eyes shifting between them as he asked, "Do you think you could find out who sent this and where Toron is?"

Balian nodded slowly. "I think so." He studiously avoided looking at his son.

"And do you think you could negotiate with them?"

Balian glanced at his wife before answering. "I think so."

"Good. Then I would ask you to set out for Paphos tomorrow. These people appear to have slaughtered innocent pilgrims. I am not happy thinking about what they might do to Toron."

Balian nodded, then turned and ordered John out of the room.

John drew a breath to protest, but thought better of it. "Yes, my lord."

Maria Zoë raised her eyebrows, but waited to see what her husband had in mind.

Balian waited until he heard the door shut with a clunk. Then he announced: "John is fifteen and a half. If I were dead, he would have come of age. He's been in your service for two years, and you have done well by him. He has matured fast and excellently. He is ready for knighthood. I would like to confer it on him at his sixteenth birthday in April. Meanwhile I would like to take him with us, for my lady and I will travel together, and I would commend to you my younger son to take his place."

"Philip? He's not exactly a comparable replacement," Aimery noted wryly, but with a twitch of a smile. "I could offer to let you take Guy —" Eschiva's gasp was audible to all of them, and Aimery smiled at her—"but as I was about to say, I can't bear to be separated from him just yet. So take John and leave Philip with me."

"Thank you. Now, what terms do you authorize me to negotiate?"

"What was your mandate from King Richard?"

"The best deal possible."

Aimery nodded. "I want peace, Balian. I don't just want Toron returned, I want an end to the insurrection. I want people to be safe traveling on my roads, regardless of what faith they are. I want people to be safe to go about their daily business, no matter what that is. I want crops sowed and harvested, not burned in the fields. I want—peace."

Balian nodded, and then crossed himself. "In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Chapter Fourteen
A Lawless Land

Cyprus
February 1195

AFTER THE SLEEPLESS NIGHT AND THE encounter with "Janis," Lakis was having difficulty concentrating. Luckily for him, Master Afanas appeared to be feeling guilty about his callous reaction to the willful destruction of Lakis' box the day before, or maybe he was just preoccupied with something else. In any case, he had allowed Lakis to take the morning off, and he'd largely left him alone since his return.

Lakis selected new wood carefully, then traced the outlines of the pattern he intended to carve on the first panel. As he worked he kept going over his conversation with "Janis." He wanted to be angry and full of hatred, but he wasn't. Instead he kept seeing the smile with which "Janis" had approached him. He'd been so *glad* to see him—like nobody else in the world since his parents had died. His aunt and uncle certainly never greeted him with a smile like that!

A customer came into the shop in front of the workshop, and Master Afanas rushed to greet her. Lakis looked up out of mild curiosity, but from where he sat he couldn't see much except that it was a woman in a richly embroidered surcoat. Women like that didn't come to the shop very often; they usually sent their servants. Janis was curious, but the other apprentices were so shamelessly peering out the door, jabbing each other, and giggling that Lakis became uninterested. He hated them!

He turned his eyes back to his work, polished the surface of the wood with the back of his sleeve, and picked up a fine chisel. Fragments of conversation filtered through the door, and he noted the cultivated but low-pitched voice of the woman: "… your reputation," "source your ivory," "book covers." Janis had once talked about carving book covers, Lakis remembered, and realized now that he was probably literate. The lady in the showroom said something about "… such a beautiful box . . . very rare . . . your workshop," and the other apprentices scatted back to their workbenches.

When Master Afanas appeared in the door, gesturing for a lady to precede him into the workshop, they were all back at their places and studiously pretending disinterest. Lakis, in contrast, glanced up and caught his breath: not only was the woman dressed in embroidered silk, she was strikingly beautiful despite being no longer young, and unlike most rich women, she was trim and still shapely rather than fat. Her eyes swept the room alertly, looking at each of the apprentices in turn, but then turned her head slightly to listen to someone behind her. Before Lakis could sort out what was happening, she was coming straight towards him, asking: “Are you Lakis?”

Lakis’ jaw dropped, and then as he gaped at the lady, he registered that “Janis” was following in her wake. It could only be his mother! Lakis scrambled off his workbench as fast as he could and dropped onto his knees. “It’s the Comnena!” he hissed at his fellow apprentices, shocked that they were so rude as to stay sitting.

Master Afanas’ head snapped around. “My lady?” he asked, but then dropped to one knee to be safe rather than awaiting an answer.

“That’s not necessary,” the Comnena assured them, gesturing for them all to get up again—but while Master Afanas and the other apprentices obeyed, Lakis remained firmly on his knees with his eyes down.

“I’m interested in this boy,” she said, standing directly before him, but addressing Master Afanas. “What are the terms of his contract?”

Master Afanas cleared his throat. “He, um, being without a sponsor, I’ve taken him on for just a year as a charity case. He gets free bed and meals—”

“One!” Lakis couldn’t resist throwing out in a flare of defiance.

“—and a half-day off every month,” Master Afanas ended complacently.

“Hmm, but evidently no shoes, no work clothes, and no bath money,” the imperial lady noted, making Lakis cringe to think she could smell how dirty he was. He curled the toes of his filthy bare feet.

“If he completes his first year satisfactorily, I will pay for a set of work clothes,” Master Afanas declared, “but before I took him in, he was a beggar. He ran away from his last master, and I was not going to spend money on him until he had proven himself.”

The Comnena gave Master Afanas a look so contemptuous that Lakis almost laughed. Then she remarked, “This boy’s parents and sisters were burned alive by the Franks, Master Afanas. Don’t you think you could have found it in your heart to be a little more charitable?”

Master Afanas’ expression of astonishment was enough to make

Lakis look down and bite his lips to keep from laughing. “I had no idea, my lady,” the master craftsman assured her. “Not a clue. Lakis never said anything about it.” To be fair, that was true, Lakis thought, but he still suspected that the Master’s astonishment pertained more to the fact that the Comnena referred to “the Franks” in a tone that suggested disapproval.

“I wish my confessor, Father Angelus, to have a word with the boy in private, while you and I discuss more reasonable terms of service. I am prepared to sponsor the boy.” With a rustle of silk she turned away and returned to the shop, leaving Lakis to gape after her.

Then a Greek priest was smiling down at him and offering his hand. “Will you come with me, Lakis?”

“Yes, father, but . . . ” Lakis looked around, confused. Had he heard right? The Comnena was going to sponsor him? Get him better conditions of work? All because of “Janis.” Lakis risked a glance at the other youth, who was standing in the doorway between the showroom and the workshop. He was smiling tentatively at Lakis, and Lakis felt intensely ashamed of his behavior this morning. But what had been in the box? He’d been so certain it was something terrible, something that would make Janis and the despot angry. He looked at the Greek priest in bewilderment.

The man looked like he was in his early fifties, with a lined, tanned face and salt-and-pepper beard. His eyes were gentle and his smile genuine. “Where does that door lead?” he asked as Lakis looked at him.

“That’s just the woodshed,” Lakis explained.

“Can we step inside?”

Lakis nodded vigorously and led the way, in a hurry to get away from the stares of the other apprentices. He closed the door behind him and they stood in the dusty little room, where the wood was stacked neatly by variety, age, and length. Sawdust softened the floor underneath and drifted in the air. The room had no window, so the only light came from under the crack of the door they had just closed. It took a while for their eyes to adjust, and neither spoke.

Finally the priest started softly, “Lakis, this morning you brought Lord John—Janis—a beautiful box inlaid with mother-of-pearl.”

Christ help me! Lakis thought, swallowing hard.

“Where did you get it?”

“Please don’t ask me that! Please!” Lakis begged.

Father Angelus nodded. “I understand. You think we want to hurt the man who brought it.”

"Don't you?"

"No. Not at all. My lord of Ibelin has been entrusted with an embassy to the man. Lord Aimery wishes to negotiate with him about the release of the abbot of Antiphonitis and his brothers. You want to see the abbot and brothers released safely, don't you?"

Lakis nodded vigorously.

"That will only happen if the Franks can meet and talk with men who sent that box."

"Why? They can just let them go, can't they?" Lakis countered.

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple. You see, the men who sent that box have taken a Frankish lord hostage and are holding him in an unknown place. The Franks won't release the good abbot and his brothers unless they are certain that the Frankish lord will be released in exchange. The lives of nine men depend on you enabling us to establish contact with the men who hold the Frankish nobleman hostage."

Lakis shook his head. "I can't help you."

"Can't or won't?" Father Angelus pressed him, but not unkindly.

"*Can't*!" Lakis insisted.

"Why not?"

Lakis shrugged his shoulders. "Because I don't know. The man who brought the box to me was Brother Zotikos. He's a brother of Antiphonitis, too, but he wasn't there when the others were arrested, so he's still free. He found me here—"

"Why would he want to find you, Lakis? Who are you to him?"

"My father's mill was located below Antiphonitis. When Lusignan's wolves came and started burning everything, my father sent me to the brothers for help. Only they couldn't help. Not against Frankish knights and sergeants! My parents and sisters were burned alive, and the brothers of Antiphonitis let me live with them until they could get word to my uncle about what happened. Then I had to go live with my uncle in Karpasia. That's how Brother Zotikos knows me."

"Why did he seek you out?"

"He needed someone to deliver the box. He said I shouldn't open it. He said—What was in it?"

"A message. Just a message. Or rather, a threat to kill the Lord of Toron if anything happened to the abbot and his brothers. Why did he think you could deliver the box?"

Lakis shrugged, ashamed to say anything about God's will to a priest. "Just because I make boxes. I could take it as a gift from my master, he said."

Father Angelus nodded. “And you don’t know where he might be now?”

Lakis shook his head vigorously. “He left as soon as he’d turned over the box. He didn’t stay more than a quarter-hour.”

Father Angelus nodded again, although Lakis wasn’t sure he believed him. “Thank you for telling me all you know, Lakis,” the priest continued in an even voice. “If God blesses us, we will save many lives—not just the nine now at stake, but many more to come—because Lord Aimery truly wants peace on this island, and so do the Lord of Ibelin and his lady. Now, if you have nothing more to share with me . . . ” The priest gave Janis another chance to confide more information, but Janis pressed his lips together stubbornly.

Father Angelus concluded he would get no more out of Lakis at this time, and with a smile suggested, “Let’s return to the others,” as he opened the door and held it for Lakis. In the workshop the other boys stared at them, but Father Angelus ignored them. They crossed the room to where “Janis” was still waiting for them. At a nod from Father Angelus, Janis broke into a broad smile and gestured for Lakis to come with him into the shop.

In the shop, the Comnena turned to smile at the youths, and then asked Lakis seriously, “So, young man, what do you think of these terms: three meals a day, a half-day off each *week* and a full day at the end of each month, a work apron and work shoes once a year, and an allowance of a two deniers per week?”

Lakis’ eyes widened in amazement at these terms; they would make him equal to the other apprentices. He wouldn’t be the “beggar” anymore.

“Good.” She turned back to Master Afanas. “Then we are agreed on the terms for the next two years.”

Lakis caught his breath and looked at his master. Two more years would enable him to finish his apprenticeship properly. He’d be a genuine journeyman if he could stay two more full years. Master Afanas nodded without noticeable hesitation or reluctance.

The Comnena turned back to Lakis and gestured to Father Angelus. He understood her gesture and produced a purse that he handed over to her. She removed two silver bezants and offered them to Lakis. He just stared at them. He’d never seen so much money all at once in his life.

“This is your allowance from the last year that Master Afanas failed to pay you. I am donating it now so you can get yourself some proper clothes, some shoes, and a haircut, and you should still have money left over for the baths.”

Lakis looked up at her. It wasn't that he had a problem accepting alms; he'd been a beggar, after all. He just couldn't grasp his sudden change in fortune.

"It's not charity, Lakis. You've earned this," she told him, mistaking his hesitation for pride.

"Thank you, my lady! Thank you!" Lakis held up his hands and she dropped the coins into them as Lakis glanced over his shoulder at Janis, who was smiling more broadly than ever.

"I will send John over to check on you now and again, Lakis. I am hopeful that you will work diligently and develop skills that will make you self-sufficient in due time."

Lakis nodded. "Yes, my lady."

"Then take your day off and go buy yourself your clothes and have a bath—or two!" The smile she gave him as she said this was dazzling, and left Lakis so dazed he just stood rooted to the spot as she departed with Janis and Father Angelus in tow.

When they were out of hearing, Maria Zoë asked her confessor, "Well?"

"He could only tell us that the man who gave him the box was a brother from Antiphonitis. Apparently he was traveling and so escaped arrest when Barlais' men came for the abbot. Very likely he wasn't there because he was engaged in stirring up trouble," Father Angelus added with a sour expression.

"Did he give a name?" John asked anxiously.

"Brother Zotikos."

"That's it!" John exclaimed, excited. "I couldn't remember, but I'm sure that's it. It's the monk who was so angry and bitter at Kolossi! I'm sure he was behind the fire there! And he was an outsider. The priest, Father Andronikos, clearly objected to the fires, saying the destruction of the factory had only put people out of work and furthermore would bring retribution on the innocent villagers. Father Andronikos cared about his flock, but Brother Zotikos was an outsider and didn't give a damn what happened to them. In fact, he might even have been the same man who told the men in the tavern at Famagusta to kill Aimery and me. . . ."

His mother and Father Angelus were staring at him, astonished. After a moment his mother asked, "Where do we find him?"

"I don't know," John admitted, a little deflated, but then he brightened. "But we can start by going to Kolossi and finding Father Andronikos. He agreed to see us again, and I'm sure he will support our efforts to bring peace. He understands that the violence is hurting

the people of Cyprus as much as it hurts us."

Kolossi, February 1195

It started to snow sometime during the night, and by the time they were ready to depart Limassol, it was already collecting in cracks and shadows. The Templars questioned if it was wise to proceed to Kolossi, and Maria Zoë at once agreed to let her new serving woman, Dimitra, remain behind in the warmth and security of the commandery. Balian was considerably more reluctant to reduce their escort, but the Templars assured them there had been no further signs of trouble since the attack on the sugar factory. "We think the troublemakers moved on—west. All the recent trouble has been around Paphos."

So Ibelin agreed to let the bulk of his knights with their squires remain in the comfort of Limassol, and proceeded with just John as their guide, Amalric and Georgios to look after their horses and be on hand for errands, and Sir Galvin, an aging Scotsman with the strength of a bull, as extra protection.

They made good progress at first, and when they reached the ruins of Kolossi, the sun broke through the cloud cover and began to melt the snow that had already fallen. This seduced them into spending longer than initially intended looking over the gutted factory. As John had anticipated, his father identified strongly with the Hospitallers and kept shaking his head in mute distress at the scale of the destruction.

It was thus noon before they were ready to proceed to the village in which John had encountered Father Andronikos. By then the sun was lost again behind thick, low clouds that threatened new snow. Ibelin wondered out loud whether they ought to return to Limassol, with a significant look at his wife.

"We didn't come all this way in the cold to see ruins, but to talk to the priest," she answered, turning on her son. "How much farther is it, John?"

"Not more than a half-hour ride, if we hurry."

"All right," his father agreed. They remounted, trotted back to the main road, and there took up a gentle canter, but they still didn't make it before the storm broke. It came down out of the Troodos Mountains with a vengeance, and suddenly they were being lashed by freezing rain and gale-force winds. There was, however, nothing to do but keep going. Balian rode around to be to windward of Maria Zoë,

and he ordered Sir Galvin to ride ahead and be sure they weren't surprised by anything.

By the time the village with its low church came into sight, they were all soaked through. They made immediately for the church to get out of the sleet, tethering the horses in the imperfect lee of the little structure. While the church offered some shelter from the sleet and wind, it had no fireplace and was bitterly cold. John at once volunteered to go in search of the priest.

He stepped back out into the storm, but had not gone more than a score of paces before a figure in the black robes of a priest emerged out of the freezing rain. With relief John recognized the man coming towards him by his white beard whipping in the wind. "Father Andronikos! Thank God! My mother and father have come to see you, but we got caught in the storm. They're in the church."

"Janis, wasn't it? Lord Aimery's squire?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner, but—it's a long story. My parents are with me now."

"Didn't you say your mother was Maria Comnena?" the priest asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"Merciful heavens! And riding about in this weather? Hurry!" The priest stretched his stride and John had to scurry to keep up. They burst back into the church, and the priest focused quickly on the only woman among them. He strode straight to her, and bowing his head he went down on one knee. "My lady! It is an honor to welcome you to my humble church, but in this weather I fear that I must offer you the hospitality of my even *more* humble home. Please! Come! Come!" He was back on his feet and gesturing for them all to follow him.

There was no resistance. Not only did the travelers welcome any place with a hearth, Father Andronikos himself exuded goodwill. Despite the circumstances, John felt that they had been right to press on with the journey.

Father Andronikos' house was directly beside the church and only a little better than the peasant cottages. It did, however, have a large fire already blazing around large logs. Indeed, it was warm and dry and smelled of fresh-baked bread. A middle-aged woman with an ample bosom and an even more generous lower half looked up astonished as the visitors crowded in, but taking her cue from Father Andronikos, she gestured everyone in to the fire in a motherly fashion. John, remembering the horses, told his host they had to get them to shelter.

"My stable's too small for six of your big horses. We'll have to distribute them. I'll show you!" Father Andronikos went back out into

the storm with John, Amalric, and Georgios. Each youth collected two horses. They left Ibelin and his lady's horse in Andronikos' own small goat and donkey shed, then took the others to the animal sheds of neighbors. By the time they returned to Andronikos' home, Maria Zoë had already been supplied with a complete change of clothes and sat by the fire in the overly abundant linen robes of her hostess, while her own gown, surcoat, and cloak were spread out on the bed in the adjacent room to dry. Ibelin and Sir Galvin, meanwhile, had stripped down to their braies and draped their hose, shirts, gambesons, and surcoats over other pieces of furniture, while their chain-mail hauberks were spread out on the flagstone apron of the hearth.

"Better get out of your wet things," Ibelin advised his son and squires. "I don't want you catching a cold."

John was not reluctant to comply, as his clothes now clung to him like icy plaster. He found a stool near the door into the kitchen, and sat to remove his wet things one layer at a time. Just as he got down to his shirt and hauled it up over his head to stand naked from the waist up, he found himself face to face with the most beautiful female he had ever seen in his life. She was gazing at him with a tray loaded with pottery mugs and a steaming pitcher. By the smell, she was bringing hot cider to the chilled guests. As their eyes met, she blushed such a bright red that John felt instantly ashamed of his nakedness. He held his wet shirt helplessly over his naked chest, but the girl had already turned away to offer the objects on her tray to Maria Zoë. Father Andronikos smiled broadly at the sight of her and announced proudly, "Here is my daughter Eirini."

"Ah," Maria Zoë smiled at the girl, "let us hope that is an omen, for we have come on a mission of peace, Father."

"I know, my lady," Father Andronikos smiled back at her, his arm encircling his daughter's slender waist as he spoke.

Maria Zoë was duly astonished and asked, "How can you know that, Father?"

"Would a queen ride through this weather with only two armed men to bring war? I have hoped ever since I heard you had landed on the island that you would be a peacemaker, for you have been both Greek and Frank and can see both sides."

Ibelin cleared his throat to indicate he wanted a translation. With a nod to his mother, John hastened over to his father's side, went down on his haunches, and whispered a translation in a low voice. From this position his own scrawny nakedness was hidden from Andronikos' beautiful daughter by his father's broader figure, but he had a clear view of Eirini as she poured the cider for his mother.

Meanwhile Father Andronikos was continuing, "Of course, I

couldn't be sure what role you *would* play. Some royal women are more concerned with their wealth, dignity, and pleasure than the people they rule. Such was the wife of Isaac Comnenus. But when Janis said you were in my church, then I knew you had come in peace."

"Point out," Ibelin urged his son after this was translated, "that in the state we're in, anyone who wishes us harm will have child's play cutting us to pieces."

John demurred. "He knows that, Papa."

Meanwhile, Maria Zoë was remarking cautiously, "I am glad to do what I can, Father, but you must not think I come on my own. Lord Aimery de Lusignan bade my lord husband see what he could do." She gestured to her husband while John translated, shifting a little more to his father's rear to secure more cover as Eirini also looked in their direction.

Father Andronikos nodded earnestly. "That is even better news, my lady. I welcome you both," he continued, bowing deeply to Ibelin, and Eirini hurried to bring the tray to her father's guest. As the elder Ibelin reached out and poured himself a portion of cider from the pitcher, the girl peered around him toward John and smiled. "You too, sir?" she asked in a whisper.

John's throat constricted so sharply it was impossible to get out more than a croaked "*parakalo*!" (Please.)

Eirini smiled and brought the tray closer. John had no choice but to surrender some of his cover to reach out, take a mug, and help himself to the cider. He thanked Eirini as she, with another smile, continued to Georgios and Amalric.

Father Andronikos, meanwhile, looked about, found a vacant stool, and brought it closer to the fire, so he could sit down at his visitors' feet. "Please tell me, my lord, how you think a humble priest such as I can help."

When the priest's words had been translated, Ibelin nodded to his wife and authorized her to explain rather than insisting on continuous translation. Maria Zoë started carefully, "We have reason to believe, Father, that certain members of the Greek Church on this island are hostile to Frankish rule here. Even before the Templars came, a priest tried to foment rebellion, posing as a Comnenus Emperor," she reminded him.

"He had no support, or very little," Father Andronikos countered.

"Not among the population, perhaps, but what about in the Church? Wasn't he a priest?"

Father Andronikos shook his head. "There was no hostility here

until the Templars came. They behaved very badly."

"Just what did they do, Father?"

"They imposed new taxes, and when the senior tax collectors came to them collectively—all worthy men with many years of loyal service—to explain that the new taxes violated King Richard's promise to rule by the laws of Manuel I, the Templars had them flogged and put in the stocks as if they were criminals. Men with long beards and university degrees!"

Maria Zoë asked John to translate this for his father, and only when he was finished and Balian nodded understanding did she urge Father Andronikos to continue. "What happened next?"

"At first, nothing. Tax collectors are not popular, even if in this case they were representing the interests of taxpayers rather than the Crown. But soon the Templars noticed that they were getting no revenues at all—much less new ones."

Maria Zoë nodded and gestured for John to translate again.

"And then?" she asked when her son finished.

"Then the Templars sent some of their men out to key sources of revenue—to the harbor masters at Limassol and Kyrenia, to the millers and bakers in Nicosia, and to important oil and wine presses round about. Everywhere, they broke into the homes and seized all the valuables the owners had. They roughed-handled the men and their servants and mocked the women."

Maria Zoë nodded and paused again for translation, which John provided his father.

"But again," Father Andronikos continued, "these were rich men, and there were many who may have felt they got only what they deserved. At the start of Lent, however, there was an incident in which the Templars, returning late one evening, found their way blocked by crowds gathered in front of St. Michael's. The people had come together innocently to hear Mass and had simply collected in such numbers that they overflowed into the street, blocking the road. The Templars rode into the crowd, ordering people out of the way, and lashing out at them with their sheathed swords. When a priest protested the rough treatment of peaceful Christians gathered to honor Our Lord, one of the Templars grabbed him by the beard so firmly that he pulled him clear off the ground. Several young men came to his assistance, and the Templars beat them back with so much force that one had to be admitted to hospital with a concussion, and another lost several teeth. The—"

"Stop." Maria Zoë held up her hand. "I need to tell this to my husband." This time she handled the translation herself, while Father

Andronikos watched the baron's face closely. At first his face was impassive and well controlled, but at one point in the flood of French narrative, he flinched and then frowned until his wife finished speaking. She turned back to Father Andronikos and told him to continue.

"The word of this incident spread like wildfire through the city, and people started getting agitated. After that the Templars could not ride anywhere without people shouting insults at them—from a distance. Sometimes stones or refuse were thrown as well, but always from behind or from overhead. When the Templars turned around or looked up, no one was visible anymore."

Maria Zoë translated this, and her husband nodded grimly. At her signal, Father Andronikos continued. "As Easter approached, the mood was getting uglier and uglier. A group of young men got very drunk one night and came out to 'serenade' the Templars with a silly drinking song in which they compared the Templars to—don't ask me why!—she-goats in one stanza and accused them of sodomy in the next. Apparently they assumed there was no one among the Templars who understood Greek. Unfortunately, they were wrong. The Templars understood and were enraged. They sent their sergeants out to arrest the youths, chasing them through the streets of Nicosia until they had caught a half-dozen of them, although allegedly two escaped. The youths they captured were mishandled, and then made to stand naked in stocks in front of the commandery for two days and a night. Several of them, it turns out, were from very good families, and their parents were treated with contempt when they tried to intercede." He stopped and nodded for Maria Zoë to translate.

The Baron of Ibelin sat back in his chair, the warmth from the fire now sufficient to make him comfortable in his half-naked state. His expression was resigned, and he nodded now and again at his wife's words.

"Then on Good Friday, the devil must have possessed them. Four Templar Knights, including their commander, burst into the cathedral during Mass and, shoving the Archbishop roughly aside, started shouting at the people that they were "schismatics" and "heretics" who would soon learn to "pray properly." It was like tossing a torch into a haystack. All at once everyone was shouting at the Templars that *they* were the schismatics and heretics. Then something snapped, and they fell on the Templars with the force of numbers and ripped their weapons off them before they could be used. They tore off their tunics and their armor, and—kicking and beating them—drove them out of the cathedral."

John hastily provided the translation this time, nodding when he

had finished. Father Andronikos continued, “Humiliated, the four Templars staggered and dragged themselves back to the commandery, hounded the entire way by men still spitting and insulting them. They made it inside, but by morning the Templars found themselves completely surrounded by a mob that was larger by far than the one that had hounded them the night before. The mob started to smash windows and batter the gate with an improvised battering ram. Furthermore, they were calling for blood. The Archbishop had retired to his home, still shaken by the rough-handling he had endured during Mass the night before. Other voices of reason were intimidated by a mob that was clearly set on violence. The majority were being egged on and riled up by the more volatile elements in the population—journeymen and sailors, teamsters, even some of Isaac Comnenus’ Armenian mercenaries, the ones who had married locally and remained. They brought out their crossbows and began firing at the Templars whenever one of them showed himself.” At a signal from Maria Zoë, Father Andronikos halted so John could provide the translation. As John finished, he drank his mug empty, and Eirini hastened over to refill it with a shy smile.

John thanked her in kind, while her father resumed his narrative. “The Templars raised a white flag and requested a safe-conduct to the coast, but there was no real leader of the mob. Besides, many of the young men suspected a trick; at least, that’s what I was later told. Maybe they were simply full of hubris and believed they could truly eliminate the Templars. There were, after all, only fourteen knights and twenty sergeants altogether, supported by fifty or sixty lay brothers.” As John translated this he watched his father’s expression carefully, and saw him nod at the numbers.

Father Andronikos took up the narrative again. “Thinking they had nothing to lose, the Templars, I am told, confessed their sins and heard Mass. Then, at the hour of dawn on Easter Sunday, they armed themselves, mounted their war horses, and sortied out of their commandery. By then most of the crowd had dispersed and gone home to welcome the Resurrection. The sortie was actually quite unnecessary.”

Maria Zoë nodded agreement while John translated.

“Tragically, the Templars confused the crowds of people on their way to Easter morning Mass with the rioters of the day and night before. They rode them down with leveled lances. Enraged witnesses rallied to fight them, storming out of all the surrounding streets with whatever weapons they could grab. The Templars were better armed, however, and by now they were fighting with fury or desperation or both. In the end they all escaped, leaving behind sixty-eight dead and

more than a hundred injured. Among the dead were six women and eleven children trampled by God knows whom in the confusion." Father Andronikos ended with a deep sigh, and sat looking very sad as John provided the translation.

"The Templars seem to attract some singularly stupid men," Ibelin noted when John finished the translation. "In addition to Gerard de Ridefort, of justifiably infamous reputation," Ibelin noted, "I met this Arnaud de Bouchart, the Templar commander here. Without self-reflection or self-doubt, he blamed all the trouble here on the Cypriots, calling them 'mad dogs' and saying they were totally 'ungovernable.' He predicted Guy would fail, by the way."

Maria Zoë translated her husband's remarks for Father Andronikos, who nodded understanding before explaining additionally: "After this incident the population turned vehemently anti-Latin. When King Guy landed with his few men, no one was willing to see them as anything other than a continuation of Templar rule. Many believed they had only come to make way for a return of the Templars, a view reinforced by the re-establishment of a Templar presence at Gastria and in Limassol. Certainly no one was prepared to pay taxes, tolls, or customs duties to him." He paused for the translation and then continued.

"And what can I say? Tragically, Lusignan proved even *worse* than the Templars. While the Templars had broken in to men's houses to take the monies they wanted, Lusignan sent out troops not only to collect money, but also to *punish* the recalcitrant. He burned down the houses of those who refused to pay taxes. When his men were ambushed by outraged inhabitants—or more commonly, when Cypriots took out their anger on the Italian merchants—Lusignan responded by sending out more men, who took hostages or burned and slaughtered whole villages in retribution. The spiral of violence has continued ever since." Father Andronikos shook his head in distress and sadness.

John, however, stood up, his thighs and calves aching from squatting so long, and announced proudly, "There has been no retribution for the fire at Kolossi, and there won't be! King Guy is dead, and Lord Aimery is different."

John's father looked up at him suspiciously and asked his wife, "Is John speaking out of turn?"

"Not really—if a little rashly," she assured her husband with a smile. Then, turning to Father Andronikos, she noted, "We are very grateful to you for your candid explanation of what happened here. It will, I hope, help us find a solution. What my son says is right: Lord Aimery de Lusignan is a very different man from his brother."

“We have seen no evidence of that,” Father Andronikos answered soberly. “Has he not just ordered the arrest and incarceration of a worthy abbot and seven brothers?”

“Actually,” Maria Zoë answered, slowly sipping her cider, “he didn’t. Certain lords who are impatient carried out the arrest without Lord Aimery’s knowledge, much less consent.”

Father Andronikos didn’t answer, but his eyes were fixed on Maria Zoë, watching for some indication that she was dissembling.

She continued, “And now someone has seized a Frankish lord, Humphrey de Toron, and we have received an anonymous threat to his life.”

Father Andronikos raised his eyebrows, sat up straighter, and smiled to his daughter. “Go help your mother with the bread,” he suggested, and she scurried away, hastily loading empty mugs on her tray as she went. Andronikos said nothing even after she was gone, however, and Maria Zoë was compelled to ask, “Have you heard of this?”

Father Andronikos nodded.

“Do you know who is responsible?”

He shook his head, but a little too sharply to be convincing.

“We *must* establish contact with them,” Maria Zoë explained.

“Couldn’t you just let the abbot and his brothers go?”

“Not without the release of Toron. If we release the abbot and his brothers and they retain Toron, then they will threaten his life to gain other concessions.”

“Very possibly,” Father Andronikos conceded, while John whispered a quick translation of the dialogue to his father.

Ibelin got abruptly to his feet and stood towering over the priest, who hastened to stand as well, wary of what was coming. “People may not like paying taxes, but without taxes no government can function. Since driving the Templars out, government on this island has broken down. Lawlessness is increasing by the day—whether it is pirates on the waterways or robbers on the highways. I understand that you might prefer to be ruled by your own, but I wouldn’t be so sure the current Greek Emperor is so benign.”

Maria Zoë translated his speech quickly.

Father Andronikos answered, “We are not asking for rule from Constantinople. Better a despot of our own, here on the island, readily accessible to our complaints and pleas. King Richard promised a restoration of the laws of Manuel I. That is all we ask and expect.” Andronikos’ tone was reasonable and his expression mild, yet there was pride and determination underneath his words, too.

Ibelin nodded at the end of John's translation, but made no promises. Instead he insisted, "We must speak to the men who hold Lord Toron. It takes two to have a dialogue."

"I suggest, then, that you do not live with the Templars," Father Andronikos advised a touch tartly.

"No? Where else are we safe?"

"Go to Paphos. The castellan of the royal fortress on the shore is an old and honorable man, appointed by Manuel himself. Tell him your mission and request his hospitality. You'll find the accommodations far more comfortable than with the Templars, my lady," Father Andronikos added, turning to Maria Zoë. Then, focusing again on Ibelin, he promised, "I will see what I can find out and send word to you there."

Paphos, Cyprus

Father Andronikos had not lied about either the accommodations or the castellan at Paphos. The old man had welcomed them graciously, opening up the royal apartments that had been unused since the last visit of Isaac Comnenus in 1189. As with so many structures built in the previous century by the Greeks, the masonry consisted of layers of different-colored stone to create stripes. Although the ground and second floor were windowless, the upper story, on which the royal apartments were located, had batteries of arched windows between delicate marble pillars. From the inside, the rooms initially seemed dingy and stuffy because the windows had been sealed with hides against the storms of winter, but the day after their arrival a strong southwest wind chased away the snow with unseasonably warm, sunny weather. Removing the heavy hide coverings from the windows, they had let in the fresh air and sunlight. At once the suite of rooms was transformed: the gold and silver mosaics glistened, and the polychrome marble in elaborate geometric designs on the floor and the frescoes on the walls came to life in full color. The castle also boasted a very welcome bath.

Ibelin was even more pleased by the defensibility of the compact fortress. It sat astride the start of a hook of land that extended out southwards from the shoreline and curled to the east to form a small harbor. The castle was thus protected by water on three sides: by the sea to the west, the harbor to the east, and a salt-water moat on the north. Furthermore, it provided generous accommodations for both man and horse. With the men he had with him, Ibelin felt confident

he could withstand a short spasm of violence, although the stores were inadequate to endure a long siege.

After settling in and setting a watch, Ibelin and his lady set out to explore Paphos. The city was still enclosed in a massive but largely ruinous wall, from which (evidently) the residents regularly obtained masonry for new buildings, creating a sense of decay. Within the wall, the sense of ancient majesty brought low continued. Between monumental buildings with marble columns and expressive statues, rough stone and plaster houses huddled like beggars. In the once-grand agora the columns lay toppled, the individual disks of marble lying like sliced salami on top of one another—evidently the work of an earthquake. In the Greek theater, people were living in the three-story structure behind the stage, their laundry fluttering on lines dangling from the windows.

Everywhere they went they were accompanied by a flock of noisy boys, more pickpockets than beggars. Although Georgios and Amalric kept the boys well out of range by flanking the Ibelins warily and chasing the most impertinent boys away with well-aimed kicks and sheathed swords, the pack of boys still clung to the Franks like flies. Older beggars, many with crutches or missing limbs and eyes, tried to block their way. They took expert advantage of the fact that the sewers appeared to be blocked or broken, so that in many places foul-smelling water spilled onto the once well-paved streets. Ibelin also noted that the fountains were dry and filled with rubbish, much of it stinking.

"The earthquake that destroyed the agora may well have broken the aqueducts and underground drainage," Ibelin concluded.

"Obviously," Maria Zoë observed as they stepped over yet another leaking sewer.

"The point is: the fountains and drains prove that the city *had* a functional water and drainage system. This isn't like Ibelin, where we had to build everything ourselves. All that's needed here is to find out where the damage is and repair it."

"Easier said than done."

"Not cheap, but the stink and rubbish creates a false image of poverty."

"False?" Maria Zoë asked skeptically, wishing it was not beneath her dignity to hold her nose.

"Didn't you notice the ships in the harbor as we set out?" her husband answered.

"Yes," Maria Zoë answered cautiously, not sure what he was driving at.

“Didn’t you notice the cargoes?”

“One was loading timber,” John spoke up eagerly, earning a smile from his father.

“Exactly, and not just ordinary timber: huge logs such as I’ve never seen before in my life. You can see a wagon with them there. They must come from the Troodos Mountains, and they are worth nearly their weight in gold. The Italian cities need timber like that for the masts and keels of their ships, but it is almost impossible to find in any land on the Mediterranean. Logs like that usually have to be imported from the Baltic Sea, and that takes forever and costs a fortune. From here, those ships can sail directly to Genoa, Pisa, or Venice at much lower cost. Did you notice anything else, John?”

“There were sugar cones on the quay,” John readily answered, “and vats of honey, too.”

“You *would* notice that!” his mother observed, knowing John’s addiction to sweets.

They laughed together, but Balian quickly turned the conversation back to the exports at the port. “Anything else?”

“Wine, I think,” John ventured, less sure of himself. There had been a lot of activity at the port as the winter was drawing to a close and ships were making ready for the first sailing of the season. The first ships out would reap the greatest profit in Western markets starved throughout the winter of whatever produce they could bring.

“Wine, olive oil, and ore of some sort—which is a waste to export when they could be smelting and refining it here. And did you see any evidence of someone recording and taxing these exports?”

Maria Zoë and John stared at him in astonishment. Neither had even thought to look for evidence of that.

“No, you didn’t,” Ibelin answered his own question, “because the customs house was an empty ruin, gutted by what I think was a recent fire.”

“Ah.” Maria Zoë was beginning to sense the drift of her husband’s thoughts.

“With the revenues from the exports in the harbor, it would almost certainly be possible to repair these sewers and the aqueduct, but people are too short-sighted to understand that. They prefer not to pay customs and export duties—and live in filth.” He gestured to the heaps of rotting vegetables collected in a clogged ditch beside the road.

“John!” he continued, coming to an abrupt halt. “Do me a favor and go across to that bathhouse and ask the price of a bath.”

John looked at him, puzzled. “But there’s a bath in the castle.”

“I don’t intend to use that dump,” Ibelin countered, “but we know for a fact that Aimery hasn’t seen a denier in revenue from Paphos in the last six months, right?”

Maria Zoë and John nodded.

“Well, I’ll wager if you ask them what they’re charging, they will name a price higher than in the best bathhouses in Acre—without giving an obol to the Crown. Which means that the owners are enriching themselves shamelessly.”

Now John was interested, too. With a smile he darted across the cobbled plaza to duck into the bathhouse, which was covered with a low dome that appeared to date from the Turkish occupation. His parents waited for him in the square, while Georgios yet again chased off the beggars and pickpockets with a flood of inventive curses.

“Why do I get the impression,” Maria Zoë started, “that you like it here?”

Balian threw back his head and laughed. “Am I that easy to read?”

“Sometimes. You do like it, don’t you?”

“Maybe it’s being near the sea again,” Balian tried to explain himself. “Listen to the gulls. They remind me of home.”

“Ibelin smelled considerably better!” Maria Zoë countered, but inwardly she was pleased by Balian’s reaction to Paphos. Up to now he had been curious and intellectually challenged by the problems facing Aimery, but he had remained detached as well, as if waiting for something. Here, at last, the enthusiasm Aimery, John, and even Philip felt for the island appeared to have ignited in her husband, too.

John was back. “Eight obols!” he declared triumphantly. His father was right. This was two obols *more* than the baths of Acre asked—after tax.

“No wonder no one protested when the Templars seized the treasure of the millers, bakers, and bathhouses,” Maria Zoë noted with a snort.

“Exactly. If we ask, we’ll probably find that prices for grain, bread, wine, oil—everything that is usually taxed—have exploded in the last four years since the fall of Isaac, but *not* because of excessive taxation—as the people have been led to believe. What’s happening is that the people who control the resources are keeping what they used to pay to the Crown for themselves, and more. As a result, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and no money goes for the public good anymore—whether it’s fixing the aqueduct or the sewers or simply driving out the robbers and pirates. This island is sinking into greater and greater lawlessness, not just because of the rebellion against us, but out of the sheer greed of the inhabitants themselves.”

“Isn’t that what Mother said practically the day we arrived?” John

reminded his father. “She said, ‘This island needs a government, not an army of occupation.’”

“Did she?” Balian looked at his wife in admiration.

“Yes, I think I did say something like that,” Maria Zoë agreed, inwardly preening that John had taken note.

“Well, she’s right,” Balian agreed with a smile for Maria Zoë. “But how do we re-establish royal authority without a king—and, more important, without recognition of our legitimacy?”

“Aimery thinks the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor will give him a crown.”

“And he’s probably right,” Balian agreed, “but the people here aren’t going to recognize that as legitimate, are they?” he asked his Greek wife.

“No,” she admitted. “Both authorities are seen with suspicion, if not outright hostility.”

“So whose authority would they accept and respect?” John asked.

“I think,” Maria Zoë started cautiously, “that you—we—need to appeal to their pride and love of independence. Didn’t Father Andronikos say they would prefer a local despot to a distant one?”

“I’m not so sure about that. It’s easier to cheat a distant despot than a near one,” Balian countered.

They had reached the wall on the far side of the city. It was in an even more crumbling and ruinous state. Balian turned around, and they started back toward the harbor and castle.

“As I’ve said before, I believe the Greek clergy is key,” Maria Zoë returned to her favorite thesis. “If we could get the local Church hierarchy to advocate Frankish rule—not necessarily as legitimate, but as the lesser evil to lawlessness and spiraling violence—that would go a long way towards buying acceptance.”

“Undoubtedly—but we haven’t been very successful so far.”

“Father Andronikos was friendly,” John pointed out.

“And we’ve heard nothing from him since,” Balian pointed out.

“It’s only been four days,” John protested.

“True, but each day in a dungeon is a day in hell,” Balian reminded him, and John was at once contrite for having forgotten about Humphrey of Toron—and the abbot and monks of Antiphonitis.

Chapter Fifteen
The Saint in the Cave

A Cave on Cyprus in an Unknown Location

HUMPHREY'S TEETH WERE CHATTERING AGAIN. THE chills came irregularly and were interspersed with fever. The fever was better because it made him lethargic, while the chills made him conscious of his misery. He had not had a change of clothes since his capture, and he had been given only a single ragged blanket to supplement his garments. This was inadequate to hold off the cold. Clothes and blanket, furthermore, were equally soiled and caked with mud from the floor of the cave. His hair and beard were encrusted with it as well, because he had nothing on which to rest his head except the rocks or the damp, naked floor.

Humphrey hated the filth even more than he hated the shackles on his wrists and ankles or the near-permanent hunger. When he was in Saracen captivity after Hattin, it had been the offer of a bath from Imad ad-Din that had shattered his desire to resist. He had been so grateful for that bath and the clean clothes. The others had detested him for having "special privileges"; they had even accused him of converting. In fact, Imad ad-Din, despite hinting that someone as intelligent as Humphrey "must see" the error of "polytheism," had never pressed Humphrey to renounce his faith. For his part, Humphrey had never been seriously tempted, but he had learned much from the Islamic scholar. He had endured the jealousy and seething anger of his fellow Frankish captives for the sake of intelligent conversation with a truly educated man—and for the baths. The hostility of the others had simply made him long to be alone.

Now he knew better.

He had been alone since his capture on Cyprus, except when they deigned to feed and water him. Sometimes it seemed as if they had forgotten him entirely, and the thirst and hunger nearly overpowered him. Or rather, it *did* overpower him, and he sobbed in self-pity or pleaded frantically for help or screamed wild threats at the solid stone of his cave prison. It didn't matter what he did. No one saw or heard

him.

Now and then, however—irregularly—someone *would* come to throw moldy bread at him and taunt him as he begged for water. There was no question that they hated him, as the Saracens had not. The Saracens had treated all the noble Frankish prisoners with the respect due a worthy enemy. The Saracens felt themselves superior, and they felt the Christians had been punished by God for their foolish "polytheist" beliefs, so they pitied more than hated their prisoners. Indeed, Imad ad-Din had genuinely liked him, Humphrey told himself.

Not so his current jailers. They wanted him dead. The only question was why they hadn't already killed him. It couldn't be because they were holding him for ransom; he was penniless. The only person who *might* have paid an obol for his release was Aimery de Lusignan, but Aimery hardly had sufficient revenues to pay his household, let alone the ransoms for his dead brother's friends. Besides, Humphrey had no illusions about Aimery *liking* him. Aimery had never forgiven him for the better treatment he had received from Imad ad-Din. . . .

If his captors knew he had no monetary value, why didn't they kill him? Humphrey asked himself. Or *were* they killing him? Just slowly, so it would be as terrible as possible?

This slow death left Humphrey time to reflect upon his life, and that was the greatest torture of all. He would turn thirty this year, if he lived until the Feast of St. John the Baptist. And what had he accomplished? He had surrendered his proud inheritance to his stepfather Reynald de Châtillon before he was sixteen. He had rejected a kingdom at twenty-one. He had lost his mother's heritage at twenty-two, and lost his wife at twenty-five.

Since then, his life hadn't been worth living.

So why didn't he just die? Why didn't God let him die?

It wasn't just his anonymous captors who hated him, he reflected: it must be God Himself. But he didn't understand *why* God hated him, any more than he understood why his captors hated him. As far as he knew, he had never met any of his captors anywhere or anytime. Nor had he engaged in any violence against the inhabitants of Cyprus. But maybe they didn't know that?

As for God, however, *He* knew that Humphrey was guilty of no violence against the Cypriots or anyone else. Why did *He* want Humphrey to suffer? It wasn't as if he had ever denied Christ. He couldn't. Much as he recognized the humanity and intellectual sophistication of men like Imad ad-Din, Salah ad-Din, and his brother al-Adil, he had never been tempted by Islam, simply because it offered him nothing. He could pray five times a day as a Christian. And he could give alms, fast, and go on pilgrimage, too. To the Muslims, both

Mohammed and Christ were prophets, and so Humphrey could not see why a pilgrimage to the tomb of one prophet was more valuable than to another. No, Islam offered him nothing at all. At least in Christianity he had the Virgin Mary and the saints.

So many saints had suffered for their faith. They had been tortured and humiliated. So had Christ. Hadn't Christ himself despaired in the hour of his death, calling out to his Father to ask why He had deserted him?

"Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Humphrey formed the words. First silently, and then as the chattering receded, he said it out loud: "Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?" The words were lost in the vastness of the cave. "Father!" Humphrey raised his voice, "Why hast Thou forsaken me?" Now his words came back at him, reverberating with deathly tension.

Humphrey pulled his disintegrating sanity together and forced himself to form the words in Greek, a language he had mastered as a youth but spoke far less fluently than Arabic. Still, he had learned his Greek by reading the Gospels, because his grandfather claimed they had originally been written in Greek. Greek was the most "authentic" form of the Holy Word. When he thought he had the phrase right, he lifted his voice and asked loudly of the darkness: Patera mou, yiati exeis me evkatelepsyes?" The last word, *forsaken*, reverberated in the cave, getting softer and more conspiratorial with each repetition.

As the echoes died down to a whisper, Humphrey lifted his voice and shouted even louder: "*Patera mou, yiati—*"

"He has not," a voice interrupted him in Greek, and Humphrey leapt out of his skin in terror. He broke instantly into a cold sweat, certain that God had answered his cry and terrified of a confrontation with the Almighty in his present state. Then he realized a light was approaching through the tunnel by which they always brought his water and food.

Humphrey went stock-still and stared toward the unsteady, yet steadily approaching, light. Within seconds a man emerged out of the tunnel, which was only about four feet high and allowed no grown man to walk upright. As the man righted himself, Humphrey realized that he was dressed in the robes of an Orthodox priest, complete with hat and a flowing white beard. Behind him scrambled some of the shabby men who had been keeping him prisoner. The latter looked strangely subdued. There was no taunting, sneering, or threatening now; they just waited uneasily by the tunnel entrance as the priest advanced.

"He has not forsaken you, my son," the priest repeated in Greek as he approached with the torch. He advanced until he was beside

Humphrey and then laid a hand on his shoulder as he repeated, “He has not forsaken you, and nor have your friends. They are trying to negotiate your release. It has not yet been secured, but I am here to take you to a more comfortable place.” Then, turning on the shabby men with him, he signaled for Humphrey’s jailers to unlock his shackles. When they finished, he helped Humphrey to his feet and led him back to the tunnel.

Humphrey was so weak he could hardly shuffle along. The priest had to hold him upright and half-drag him along. He was a strong man despite his long white beard.

As they neared the entrance of the tunnel, the light started to blind Humphrey. He put his hand over his eyes and resisted moving forward. The priest snapped at the young men, and one returned with a strip of cloth that they used to bind Humphrey’s eyes. Even when he was blindfolded, the light was almost painful, and then suddenly Humphrey felt the warmth of the sun. It was like paradise.

A cacophony of Greek erupted around him. Men were exclaiming, cursing, mocking, and chattering. The priest silenced them. Humphrey clung to his arm, and he led Humphrey across some uneven ground to something wooden. It moved. “Here, I’ll help you up,” the priest said and then turned Humphrey around. With the help of a second man, he lifted Humphrey up onto the wooden thing. It moved again and Humphrey gasped. The men around him laughed. The priest silenced them again. He put his hand on Humphrey’s knee to comfort and steady him. Then he clicked with his tongue, and Humphrey’s seat moved sideways. After a couple more strides, Humphrey realized he was sitting on the pannier of a donkey. No wonder the men around him laughed! Despite his filth and hunger, Humphrey was ashamed of this ultimate humiliation: to be transported on the back of a donkey like a peasant woman.

The trail, however, was steep, and the donkey had to brace and find her footing carefully. Humphrey had no choice but to cling to the sides of the pannier. The priest never left his side, however, and as time passed he was glad not only of that warm hand, but of the donkey itself. He could not have walked this far.

At times the air became very cold and the light went away, suggesting they were traveling through shade. Sometimes Humphrey could hear the wind rustling the trees around him, but not always. He couldn’t figure out what made the shade if it wasn’t trees. Eventually they came to a stream. Humphrey heard the water even before they stopped and the donkey dropped her head to drink.

“We’ve made it,” the priest announced at last, and Humphrey felt hands untying his blindfold. Although he had to blink and squint, his

eyes had adjusted enough to enable him to see his surroundings. They were in a mountain clearing by a stream. Set back a little from the bank stood a small stone church with a single apse. Beside the church were several hovels slowly leaking thin columns of smoke.

Monks emerged from one of these huts and came toward Humphrey. They shook their heads at the sight of him, in pity or perhaps disapproval at his treatment rather than hostility. Without speaking they gestured for him to follow them, as if they had taken a vow of silence. The priest who had brought him smiled at him and gestured for him to go with them. "You'll be safe here," he assured Humphrey, "until your friends can arrange your release."

The monks led Humphrey to a goat shed and gestured for him to strip out of his filthy clothes. When he was naked, they made him get into the trough and brought him scrub brushes to clean himself. Although the water was cold, Humphrey still welcomed the bath. By the time he was finished they returned with one of their own robes, and Humphrey gratefully put it on.

Next they led him inside one of the huts and had him sit at a table. They gave him a pottery cup of water straight from the spring and unleavened bread. The water was cool and clean; the bread was fresh and still a little warm. He ate it ravenously. Indeed, he could not remember another meal ever tasting better.

After the meal, the monk led him to another hut filled with wooden beds laid with straw and gestured for him to lie down. Gratefully he did. It was soft and wonderfully dry after the floor of the cave. With a deep sigh, he started to drift off to sleep. As sleep swept over him, he was wondering who his "friends" could possibly be. He felt that he had none left in the whole world—ever since Isabella had abandoned him.

Paphos, Cyprus

John dropped his visor over his eyes, lowered his lance, and spurred down the sandy stretch of beach that his father's knights had turned into an improvised tiltyard. His father, his knights, and their squires came here daily to practice their skill at arms. A knight could not afford to let his skills become rusty any more than he could let his chain mail rust. Usually John fought Amalric, Georgios, or one of the other squires, but today Sir Galvin had challenged him.

"Come on, John!" he'd called out. "You've got the best horse here! What have you got to fear? I'm without a lance! I'll take you on with

shield and ax alone!"

It was a taunt no youth could ignore, although John inwardly thought that Troubadour's obedience and agility hardly made up for Sir Galvin's greater strength, weight, and experience. Hoping that speed might compensate for his much lighter weight, John urged Troubadour to a full gallop. His lance tip hit Sir Galvin's shield, but it had no apparent effect on the knight himself. The tip snapped off and the butt slid off the curvature of the shield. Then, just as John started to ride past, the Scotsman's blunted ax came smashing down on his shoulder. It hit John with such force that he swayed in the saddle. Grabbing Troubadour's abundant mane with his left hand, he just managed to keep from falling off as the horse continued down the tiltyard at full gallop.

As he reached the far end of the lists, Troubadour automatically fell into a trot and then halted. John dropped his reins and the broken lance to feel his left shoulder with his right hand; he was convinced something was broken. Instinctively he stretched out his arm, but the fact that he could move it belied the theory that the shoulder was broken. But it was killing him all the same.

Sir Galvin trotted over, grinning from his old-fashioned, open-faced helmet. "Well done, lad! You're very good!" he announced in a loud voice.

"Oh, is that why I'm covered with bruises?" John snapped back, frowning inside his own helmet.

It was only when his remark was met with general laughter that John registered how many men had gathered to watch the little joust, his father included. His father's face was guarded, but the set of his lips suggested he was not pleased. What John couldn't tell was whether his father was displeased with his performance or with Sir Galvin's challenge.

"Again?" Sir Galvin asked.

John tipped open his visor to glare at the older man, but with his father listening, he couldn't answer any other way than, "Sure. Why not?"

"Good, lad! Now remember, if you hit me squarely enough to fling me back against the cantle of the saddle, it'll make it much harder for me to hit you with my ax."

John nodded, took a deep breath, and turned Troubadour around, while Sir Galvin trotted back toward the far end of the lists. As he waited for Sir Galvin to take up his position, his father brought him a fresh lance and paused to pat Troubadour on the neck. He didn't look at John, but spoke as if to the horse. "Fool the old man. When you're

three strides away, cut across in front of him and shift your lance over your horse's head to ride past him on the right. No need to hit his shield; just avoid his ax."

John only had time to nod once as his father stepped back. He started down the tiltyard, his teeth clamped together in determination and concentration. When he asked Troubadour to pivot sharply left, the stallion executed a perfect flying change, as they had often practiced. At the same instant, John ducked down and hunched over the pommel as he rode past Sir Galvin without even attempting to place his lance.

The Scotsman let out a bellow of protest. "Cheater! Who taught—My lord, you're a bad influence!" He shook his fist at Ibelin, adding indignantly, "How is the lad ever going to learn to fight properly with tricks like that?"

Ibelin was grinning with satisfaction, and he called back without remorse: "Every knight has to cultivate his own advantages. Yours is your great strength. John and I don't have that muscle power, so we have to use tricks. Well done, John!"

Sir Galvin was still grumbling, but Ibelin paid no attention. He'd been distracted by someone who tapped him on the shoulder from behind. As he turned in response, the man threw something at him, then ducked down and disappeared in the crowd. Ibelin felt his blood run cold as he realized how easily it could have been a dagger flung into his belly. As he recovered from the shock, however, he looked to his feet where the object thrown at him had fallen. He reached down and picked up a rolled piece of parchment. It had Greek writing on it. Now his heart was pounding. He turned back toward the lists and gestured John over.

John trotted over, grinning with pride, but his face fell when he saw his father's expression. "What did I do wrong?" he asked, bewildered.

"Nothing. Here. Read this. Someone just threw it at me."

Relieved, John dropped the reins to take the parchment from his father. "Coral Bay. Saturday. Nones," he read out loud. Then he looked up with excitement igniting his eyes. "Father Andronikos has done it! We have a rendezvous!"

His father nodded much less enthusiastically. All he acknowledged was, "It would seem so. I want you to ride back to Kolossi and ask Father Andronikos to join us. I want a witness whom everyone can trust."

John nodded eagerly. He'd be able to see Eirini again, and this time he wouldn't be half naked or looking like a drowned rat!

Coral Bay

Ibelin took all of his knights, their squires, and both his own. With John and himself that made sixteen armed men, and he made sure all of them were in gleaming armor, polished helmets, and clean surcoats; their horses were brushed and curried until their coats were like satin. Georgios was entrusted with the swallow-tailed Ibelin banner: red on the lower half, marigold on the top, with a red cross pattée on the golden half near the staff. Amidst all that chivalric pageantry, Father Andronikos on his donkey was almost a comic figure, but he gave no indication of feeling either ridiculous or intimidated.

They followed the coastal road, which roughly paralleled the shoreline, although it continued straight when the coast jutted into the sea in a series of peninsulas. To the right the Troodos Mountains loomed up purple and majestic, and to the left the sea, almost always visible, glistened. The coast of Cyprus was far more rugged than that of the Levant. Great slabs of limestone tumbled down into the water, forming promontories that extended underwater as treacherous ledges. A ship unfortunate enough to be wrecked on this coast had almost no chance, Ibelin reflected, and began to wonder if there had been any survivors from the pilgrim ship wrecked here the previous fall. Aimery had always accused the locals of killing the survivors, convinced that not *every* soul on board could have drowned. Balian was no longer so sure.

It was well past noon, and Ibelin was beginning to get anxious about making the rendezvous on time, when they crested a shallow hill and suddenly found themselves looking down on a magnificent bay. Limestone arms enclosed it, but in the concave interior the shore was lined by pristine white sand. Furthermore, unlike the water of the Levant, which was muddied by the constant churning of waves and currents on the sandy bottom, the water here was crystal clear. It was possible to see rocks scattered across the bottom, a turtle paddling in a leisurely fashion, and schools of silver fish darting about. The water itself was aqua in the shallows, but gradually turned turquoise before it became a bright cobalt blue in the distance.

Ibelin drew up to gaze in silent amazement at the beauty and serenity of the scenery, while beside him John put his feelings into words with an enthusiastic, “That’s beautiful!”

“Coral Bay,” Father Andronikos told them simply.

Ibelin glanced toward the sun, judging they were not more than a half-hour ahead of the rendezvous time. He searched the road ahead

and the rocky escarpment that fell from the road down toward the beach. There was not another living soul in sight. He frowned. He did not want to think they had come this distance with so much show only to be ignored.

Father Andronikos read his expression and said, “Be patient, my lord. If I am not mistaken, that is a boat.” He pointed out to sea.

Since the sun was already sinking down the sky, Ibelin had to shade his eyes and squint to see what the priest had seen—but, indeed, there was a black spot far out upon the cobalt water. That made sense, of course, Ibelin noted; what better way to keep one’s whereabouts secret than to use the sea as your highway? No one could track a boat.

He nodded and ordered his men to dismount. When he started to lead them off the road to descend to the beach, however, Father Andronikos stopped him. “I think,” he said softly, “you will have to meet Brother Zotikos alone. He will not land if he sees so many armed knights waiting for him. He will think it is a trap. Your men can stay up here where they can see what is happening and come to your aid if there is any foul play, but we must go alone, on foot, and unarmed.”

Ibelin stared at him while Georgios translated, then grimaced, not at all happy with this suggestion. After a moment, however, he nodded once, unbuckled his sword, and handed it to Sir Galvin. Then he turned to Father Andronikos and announced, “I need a translator, and it will be my son John.” He could have chosen Georgios, of course, but he recognized that this was an opportunity for his firstborn to learn about negotiations with an enemy.

Father Andronikos nodded when the words were translated, adding, “As long as he is unarmed.”

John at once removed his sword and handed it to Georgios, his heart pounding with excitement. Ibelin turned the reins of his stallion over to Amalric, and John handed Troubadour’s reins to another of the squires before following his father off the road, Barry at his heels as always.

“Leave the dog here,” his father advised.

“But he’s a concealed weapon!” John protested a low voice.

Ibelin looked down at the dog, gazing up at him with his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth and his tail lashing from side to side, and found it hard to believe. His skepticism was easy to read from his face, and John added earnestly, “He saved my life once already. I promise, he’ll kill anyone who tries to lay a hand on either of us.”

Ibelin glanced at Father Andronikos, but the priest appeared uninterested in the dog, so he shrugged and they started down the

steep, rocky, winding trail to the beach. Meanwhile, the black dot on the water became larger and larger until it resolved itself into a boat with four oarsmen, a coxswain, and a passenger. By the time Ibelin's party reached the start of the wide beach, the boat was well into the little bay. The passenger was indeed an Orthodox monk with a thick black beard.

Father Andronikos laid a hand on Ibelin's arm. "Wait here. Make him cross the sand to meet you, leaving his men behind as you have left yours."

Ibelin nodded at the translation and waited, watching as the bow of the boat collided with the shore at the far end of the beach. One of the oarsmen jumped over the side to land in thigh-deep water. This lightened the boat enough to float the bow again, and the sailor took hold of the gunnel to guide the boat back onto the beach as a second oarsman jumped over the other side. Together they pulled the boat far enough onto the sand for the monk to clamber over the side onto dry land.

"They look like a bunch of pirates," Ibelin observed as the remaining sailors disembarked. Below the waist they wore long, baggy braies that ended just below the knee, leaving their calves and feet bare. On their upper bodies they wore shirts with short sleeves, open at the neck but bound at the waist by thick leather belts. Prominently displayed in the belts were long, curved knives, shorter straight knives, and in one case a sling. Their skin was darkly tanned, their hair long and unkempt, and they were all bearded, though only the monk wore a beard long enough to reach his chest.

John had not translated his father's remark, and Father Andronikos did not request one. He announced instead: "The monk is Brother Zotikos of Antiphonitis."

John, having passed the message, added in a whisper, "I recognize him! He's the same monk who told the men in Famagusta it was as wise to kill a little viper as a big one—meaning me."

His father turned and stared at him in shock; John had forgotten that he'd told his *mother* of the incident in Famagusta, but not his father. "I'll tell you later!" he promised, as there was no time for an explanation now. Brother Zotikos was striding toward them, his eyes burning with hatred.

From the top of the escarpment, Sir Galvin and Ibelin's other men watched anxiously. They shared Ibelin's assessment of the sailors, and while they could not see Brother Zotikos' eyes, they hardly needed to. His every gesture exuded hostility and aggression, so much so that Barry lowered his head and curled his lips in a threatening stance. Sir

Galvin glanced over his shoulder to Sir Sergios. The Maronite Syrian had served the Count of Tripoli at Hattin, but had been fighting under Ibelin's banner ever since the great armed pilgrimage from the West that had wrested control of the coast back from Saladin. He was a superb archer, and he already had his bow out of its case. His quiver hung from the pommel of his saddle.

Sir Galvin nodded to him, and he fitted an arrow onto the string, lifted the bow, pulled the string back to his ear, and looked down the arrow with narrowed eyes at his target: the Greek monk's broad chest. He nodded, then gently eased the string back to the uncocked position, yet kept the arrow notched. At this range, he was confident he could kill the Greek monk before he could do any harm to their lord.

None of Ibelin's men could hear what was being said, but they could see the monk gesturing wildly with his arms. He threw them out wide, then rotated his right arm like a windmill. Then his hands formed fists that he held under Ibelin's nose. A moment later he thrust out an index finger and jabbed the air in front of Ibelin's face—eliciting an angry warning bark from Barry, whom John was visibly restraining from attacking.

Throughout it all, Ibelin appeared impassive. His stance was relaxed, his arms akimbo, his weight on his right leg with his left bent and slightly forward. His men recognized he was actually poised to swing his weight forward with his right fist if he needed to. Compared to the apparent flood of words that accompanied the dramatic gestures of the monk, Ibelin appeared to say very little. Once or twice he lifted his head as if to make a short remark. Each time his words provoked a new round of angry gestures from the monk, followed by increasingly violent gestures from Barry.

Once Father Andronikos tried to intervene, only to harvest a series of stabs with an index finger in his direction from the younger cleric. John, meanwhile, was having trouble holding his dog, and was clearly distressed, confused, and a little frightened. He looked at his father for guidance, but the elder Ibelin remained calm, signaling for him to restrain the dog.

"I don't think things are going well," Sir Galvin observed generally, and Georgios shook his head sadly.

Abruptly, Ibelin turned his back on the monk and started back up the escarpment. The monk shouted furiously after him, making Georgios wince at the crude threat. Sir Galvin looked over, on the brink of asking for a translation, but then thought better of it. On the beach Father Andronikos was evidently trying to reason with the angry young monk, his hand on the latter's arm. The younger man

shook him off, and with a violent, dismissive gesture started striding toward his boat. The sailors were already shoving it back into the water; the stern floated while the bow remained on the sand, ready for Zotikos to re-board.

Ibelin reached the top of the escarpment slightly breathless from the climb, and held out his hand for his sword belt. “Hopeless!” he announced to his men, snatching the belt and wrapping it around his waist to buckle it snugly. “He insists that they will keep fighting until we are either driven from the island like the Templars, or all dead.” He grabbed the reins of his stallion, threw them back over the horse’s head, and gathered them up as he pointed his toe in the stirrup to haul himself into the saddle.

He was so agitated that he swung his horse around and started to ride off before John had had a chance to mount. Then he caught himself and waited, his expression grim.

“So they wouldn’t consider exchanging the abbot for Toron?” Sir Galvin asked, puzzled and disbelieving.

“No. That monk is a fanatic. He is incapable of compromise or negotiation. Saladin was pure reason compared to him!”

John’s seat hit the saddle, and his father set his horse into a canter from a standstill. He had rarely been so angry. Most of all, he hated to think that his nephew Henri de Brie was right: that the only answer to this rebellion was to crush it with unrelenting and merciless force.

Paphos

It was a long time since Maria Zoë had seen her husband this upset. He could not sit still, but instead paced around the hall, the heels of his boots clacking on the marble floor. It had been dusk by the time he and his knights had returned, and the bells ringing across the town to the north now marked vespers. Georgios entered with a burning reed with which to light the lamps, and as he went from one brass lamp to the next, the mosaics on the walls began to glint in the firelight. In the groined arches overhead, the gold stars painted on the blue field caught the light of the lamps and began to twinkle. It was for this reason that Maria Zoë loved this room after dark.

In his present mood, however, her husband had no eye for the beauty around him. “The man’s a fanatic,” he kept repeating. “A blind fanatic who cares nothing about the cost of his intransigence. He literally said he would rather see the entire island go up in flames than give us a single a province, a single city, a single inch of his

‘sacred’ Cyprus! He was no more rational than John’s damned dog!”

“And does he answer to no one?” Maria Zoë asked cautiously. “Surely a man so young is not the leader of the entire rebellion?”

“He *said* he answered only to God!” Balian scoffed.

“But he is a monk. He must have vowed obedience to his superiors.”

“Yes! The abbot whom Barlais so *stupidly* threw in his dungeon,” Ibelin snapped back. “I think we did this damned madman a favor by freeing him of any restraining voice of reason!”

“Do you think that if you released the abbot, he might be able to bring his subordinate to reason?”

“After a month in Barlais’ tender care? The abbot is more likely to have been radicalized himself! Prison rarely breaks strong men. Think of Reynald de Châtillon. He endured fifteen *years* in horrible conditions to emerge more violent and hate-filled than ever before. My fear—”

A knock on the door silenced Balian; he cut himself off to call out, “Yes?”

The door opened and Georgios bowed. “My lord, Father Andronikos is here and begs an audience.”

Balian shrugged and gestured for the squire to bring him in. As they waited, he remarked to his wife, “Father Andronikos is not to blame for this outcome. I believe he is sincere in wanting peace.”

Maria Zoë nodded agreement, and then rose to her feet as the Greek priest was ushered in. Father Andronikos bowed his head first to her and then to her husband. Balian indicated he should take a seat, and sent Georgios for wine and nuts.

“I won’t stay long,” Father Andronikos countered. “I simply came to beg a favor of you, my lord.”

Balian raised his eyebrows as his wife translated, and indicated with open palms that the priest should continue.

“There is a very wise man on this island, a highly educated hermit, who lives in a cave less than a day from here. He—he is greatly venerated among the people of this island. Many believe he is a living saint.” Father Andronikos paused so Maria Zoë could translate.

As she finished, Balian pressed him to continue with an audibly skeptical, “Yes?”

“I want you to come with me to meet him,” Father Andronikos confessed.

“Alone, I presume,” Balian noted cynically as his wife translated.

“With your son, or your Greek squire—but no other men, and unarmed.”

Balian nodded, his expression grim, when she explained the terms. “I thought as much,” he remarked sharply.

“This is not a trap, my lord, I swear it upon my soul,” Father Andronikos assured him, clasping the silver cross he wore on his breast. “I have taken the captive Frankish lord there for safekeeping as well. You will be able to see him if you come with me.”

Maria Zoë could not restrain her own excitement as she passed this information to Balian. The news made Balian catch his breath, and they held each other’s eyes for a moment as Father Andronikos continued. “Father Neophytos is very strict about excluding women from his monastery,” Father Andronikos explained apologetically to Maria Zoë in Greek, “or I would welcome your presence on our journey, my lady.”

“No,” Balian said sharply, mistaking the meaning of the monk’s remarks so evidently directed at his wife rather than himself. Answering what he thought the monk had said rather than his actual words, he announced, “My lady and my son stay here. I will travel with Georgios alone. When do we leave?”

“If we can leave just before dawn, my lord, that would be best. From the northern gate.”

Balian nodded agreement, and through his wife answered, “I will meet you there at dawn.”

By midmorning, the trail into the wooded flank of Troodos had become so steep and rocky that Ibelin had to dismount and lead his palfrey Hermes. The stallion was not happy, and kept stopping to look around as if he expected lions to jump out at him from the surrounding woods. To a horse born and raised in Palestine, forests were strange and dangerous places.

Ibelin wished he didn’t share his stallion’s apprehension. There was, he thought, something primordial about a forest as thick, dense, and tall as the one that surrounded them. The trees reached forty or fifty feet into the sky, higher than any mast he had ever seen; their trunks were broader than a man could embrace with his arms, and their roots twisted between the rocks with the power to crumble them.

As they climbed higher and deeper into the forest, a silence encased them. The sound of the sea was long since silenced; they were nowhere near habitation, and even the wind seemed to have been absorbed by the trees. There was just the chink of hooves on the rocky trail and their own heavy breathing—and the birds, of course. They called sharply overhead or twittered near at hand. Large birds of prey occasionally flew up, startling Hermes into abrupt sideward leaps or making him stand quivering as he looked about expecting the next

attack.

Just about noon, when Ibelin was hot, sweaty, and hungry, Father Andronikos turned sharply to the left, leading them down an even narrower path that wound its way in zigzags down a fold in the mountain to emerge in a clearing beside a stream. On the far side of the clearing, a sheer rock outcropping reared up, pierced by several caves that opened some fifteen feet above the valley floor. To the right, beside the stream, was a small chapel, and beyond it several flat-roofed huts.

Several monks emerged out of one of the houses, and one came to meet the three men. He crossed the stream on stepping stones while holding the skirts of his black robes out of the water. Father Andronikos went forward to meet him and they spoke together in low voices, the monk frowning darkly at Ibelin and Georgios. “He’s protesting our presence, my lord,” Georgios whispered. “He says Father Andronikos had no right to bring Latins here.”

Father Andronikos did not appear intimidated, and answered calmly. Georgios narrated: “He is vouching for us, my lord. He insists that we be allowed to see Father Neophytos.”

The local monk answered sharply, gesturing angrily, but then he turned and splashed back to the far shore, ignoring the stepping stones and getting his bare feet wet, but still holding the skirts of his cassock out of the water. Father Andronikos followed him, but Ibelin and Georgios opted to remount for the crossing and arrived on the far shore dry-footed.

Here they were required to dismount again, and Father Andronikos asked them to wait while he went to the face of the rock and called up in the direction of the caves. After he had done this twice, a rope ladder was flung out of the cave, and Father Andronikos hauled himself up the face of the cliff one difficult step at a time until he reached the ledge outside the entrance. He left the ladder and disappeared inside the cave.

After that, nothing happened for a long time. Ibelin considered his surroundings. The stillness of the forest was broken by the gurgling of the stream, which rendered it less ominous. Furthermore, to build the church and dwellings, the forest had been felled, expanding the clearing. As a result, the sun poured down, bright and warming. Because they were surrounded on all sides by higher peaks and slopes, there was no wind. Protected from wind and warmed by the sun, the little valley was already ablaze with wildflowers, and the grass was long and rich. The two horses were grazing contentedly, occasionally expressing their satisfaction with short, conversational snorts.

“*Kirios* Ibelin!” The voice came from the ledge before the cave.

Father Andronikos was standing there waving. “Ela!” (Come).

Ibelin and Georgios got to their feet, and Ibelin led the way up the ladder. As he reached the ledge before the entrance, Father Andronikos backed up into the cave, as there was room for only one man on the ledge at a time. Ibelin ducked through the entrance and immediately caught his breath in amazement and wonder. He was standing in the nave of a church carved completely out of bedrock. Even more astonishing, the walls were adorned with paintings in vivid colors. Lifelike and life-sized figures on the narrow wall to his left depicted a tall golden-haired angel with spread golden wings hovering over a kneeling maiden: the Annunciation. Along the wall ahead of him, in painted arches, were the Nativity, Christ teaching in the Temple, Christ sharing the loaves, Christ turning water to wine, Christ walking on the Sea of Galilee. . . .

Behind him Georgios gasped as he too stepped inside the stone church. Ibelin glanced over his shoulder at his awestruck squire with a smile of shared emotion. These were some of the most beautiful paintings either of them had ever seen—not excluding the paintings in the Holy Sepulcher, Nazareth, and Bethlehem.

Father Andronikos was standing at the wooden screens dividing the far bay of the little church from the nave they had entered. He was smiling faintly, evidently enjoying their reaction. “Father Neophytos brought a famous artist from Constantinople to do the painting. Your wife may have heard of him,” Father Andronikos remarked: “Theodoros Apseudes.”

Ibelin nodded absently as Georgios translated in an awed whisper. It wasn’t that Georgios had ever heard of the artist, but *anyone* brought from Constantinople sounded impressive, and the graceful vitality of the paintings spoke for themselves.

“Come.” Father Andronikos gestured again for them to come with him through the screens, and somewhat hesitantly Ibelin and Georgios followed. They found themselves in a small semicircular chamber from which another door led out the far side. On their right, however, an altar carved out of rock was lit by several candles that burned on either side of a silver icon showing the Virgin with Christ in her arms.

Ibelin and Georgios both went down on one knee facing the altar and crossed themselves. Ibelin said a Pater Noster, adding at the end a formless prayer for assistance from the Prince of Peace. When he finished, he found the door from the room beyond filled with a tall, thin monk with a gray beard that was longer, though not as full, as Father Andronikos’. Ibelin got to his feet, but respectfully bowed his head to the old man.

“You are a Frankish lord,” the old man said in a firm, dry voice.

Georgios whispered the translation into his ear from behind, and Balian answered, “Yes. I am Balian, Baron of—”

“Ibelin. I know. You defended Jerusalem against the infidel Saracen.”

It surprised Ibelin that Father Andronikos had provided such a comprehensive biography, but he bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“Do not mistake a conscious decision to withdraw from the world for ignorance, Frank. I do not like living among the temptations of the world, but I keep myself very well informed of world affairs.” The hermit paused for Georgios to perform the translation. Then he continued, “When I was younger, I sought advice and guidance from several hermits in the Holy Land, but my bishop insisted that I had no right to keep my inspired insights to myself. He made me take disciples. By recording my thoughts, I can reach many men—even women—without having to see but a very few, or none at all of the latter.” Again he paused for the translation.

Ibelin nodded, and Father Neophytos continued, “I do not write simply about theology. I have been recording the events of the world, particularly as they affect this island, because they may well indicate that the end of the world is coming. Since the death of Manuel I, Constantinople has fallen into the hands of unholy men, while holy Cyprus has been visited by the tyranny of the cruel and rapacious Isaac Comnenus. Worst of all: Jerusalem has fallen to the infidels. A dire omen.”

Ibelin was discomfited as Georgios translated this last sentence. He wondered just how much guilt for the loss of Jerusalem the Cypriot monk placed on his individual shoulders.

“Not all the armies of the West could drive the infidels out of the Holy Land,” the monk continued. “Rather, they brought new horrors, for although the English King ended the rule of terror by Isaac Comnenus, the traitorous scoundrel turned around and sold this sacred island—as if it were nothing more than a pasture or a piece of livestock—to that horde of money-grubbing abominations that call themselves by the heathen name of the Knights of the Temple! How do men dare to call themselves Christian monks when they bear arms? How dare they take their name from the Jewish Temple? Surely they must know they are an offense to God!”

As Georgios translated this lengthy diatribe, Ibelin began to wonder if he’d been dragged all the way here just to hear a lecture against the Templars.

The Cypriot monk continued, his voice getting louder and angrier. “And as if that weren’t enough, after the God-fearing people of Cyprus had driven the offensive Jew-loving Templars away, the English

scoundrel sold the island yet *again*, only this time to that notorious instrument of the devil: Guy de Lusignan!" The monk was clearly working himself into a rage, and Ibelin needed no translation to know he was now talking about "Guy de Lusignan"—though he had not thought of Guy as an "instrument of the devil" before Georgios provided the translation.

"Since his arrival on this island, we have had no peace. Rather, we are smitten with one calamity after another. Anyone who can afford to leave has fled, leaving behind the poor, the helpless, and the uneducated. This island, the birthplace of love and beloved of the apostles, is daily becoming poorer and more benighted."

"It is, isn't it?" Ibelin snapped back, when the last was translated for him.

The interruption and his tone took the hermit-monk by surprise. He started visibly and fell silent with a puzzled, angry look at Father Andronikos.

Ibelin took advantage of this break in the monk's monologue to launch into a speech of his own. It had not been prepared, but the intensity of his feelings gave him words. "This island is suffering from a lack of government. Pirates control the sea lanes, and smugglers clog the ports. Everyone who can, enriches himself at the expense of his neighbors, and no one looks after the common good of the people. The aqueducts spill their water in the wilderness rather than feeding the fountains of the cities. The sewers pour their infectious odors into the homes of rich and poor alike." Georgios translated all this in a rush of words, his heart pounding in fear at the audaciousness of his lord toward such a holy man.

Father Neophytos was too astonished to respond at once, and Ibelin continued, asking provocatively, "And why? Because people—monks—have set themselves up in the place of emperors and governors. People no longer respect the proper authorities, nor obey the laws, nor pay taxes. Lawlessness is spreading, and with it comes the tyranny of anarchy."

Ibelin waited for his words to be translated, and saw the holy hermit lift his chin and look at him with piercing, intelligent eyes while Georgios delivered his words in Greek. He watched as the anger was replaced by something closer to surprise, if not respect. As Georgios' translation ended, the hermit remarked simply, "You speak the truth."

Ibelin understood the word "*alithea*"—truth—and breathed out a little.

The monk continued with a question: "So we agree on the diagnosis. What do you propose as the cure?"

“Aimery de Lusignan is not Guy. He is a wise and prudent man. He would bring peace and prosperity to this island, if given a chance. He has asked me to help bring peace.”

The hermit turned to Father Andronikos with a question, but Father Andronikos shook his head and looked at Georgios. The squire put the question to his lord. “He asked, why you? Why did Aimery not come himself?”

“Tell him kings do not negotiate; they send envoys and ambassadors.”

“Aimery isn’t a king,” Georgios pointed out anxiously.

“He means to be. Tell Father Neophytos what I have said.”

Georgios did what he was told and received the next question. “Is it true your master negotiated the peace between the English King and the infidel Sultan Saladin?”

“It is,” Georgios answered for his lord.

“Then I am honored.” The hermit let a smile flit over his lined face. “Let us sit.” He backed out of the little church, and Father Andronikos gestured for Ibelin and Georgios to follow him into the final room. This was more spacious than the altar room, although much smaller than the nave. It was as beautifully painted as the rooms before, and in addition offered modest creature comforts such as a ledge carved out of rock on which a straw mattress lay, and another bench carved along the far side behind a stone table. The monk sat on his bed and indicated that Ibelin should sit on the bench behind the table. Ibelin did so warily, not sure what to expect now.

“What terms does Aimery de Lusignan offer in exchange for peace?” the hermit asked via Georgios.

“First, the release of Humphrey de Toron in exchange for the release of the abbot and monks of Antiphonitis.”

The hermit nodded but made no comment in response, so Georgios looked back at his lord and nodded for him to continue.

“Second, the restoration of the laws of Manuel I Comnenus for the native inhabitants of the island, and their own courts and churches.”

The monk cut Georgios’ translation short to ask sharply, “*Ecclisies*?” Churches?

Again, Ibelin understood the word; having a wife who was a native speaker and two sons who were learning rapidly had started to improve his own understanding. He answered in Greek, “*Ne, ecclisies*.” Yes, churches.

The monk still didn’t seem to believe him, and turned to Georgios. “He said we will be allowed to retain our own churches?”

"Yes, courts and churches."

Surmising that the hermit was questioning his promise, Ibelin told his squire: "Remind him that we never suppressed the Greek, Maronite, Jacobite, or Armenian churches in the Kingdom of Jerusalem."

The hermit nodded thoughtfully once this was conveyed to him by Georgios, and then muttered, "This too is true. I traveled across the Holy Land, and Greek and Latin clergy shared many churches and monasteries. Indeed, new Greek churches and monasteries were built under Frankish rule." He was speaking more to himself than to Ibelin, but Georgios translated nevertheless. Neophytos nodded again, and then announced, "I must pray. Leave me." He made a gesture of dismissal, and Ibelin got to his feet, bowed his head respectfully, and returned the way he'd come. Father Andronikos, however, lingered longer in the little cell, the recipient of a flood of instructions from the hermit.

Georgios tensed and grabbed his lord's arm. "My lord! I think, if I heard correctly, he just ordered Toron's release. As a goodwill gesture. He said that will test the truth of your words, and it is the Christian thing to do."

"Are you sure?"

"No, but we'll soon find out."

Father Andronikos took his leave of Father Neophytos, and as he emerged from the altar room, the smile on his face said it all.

Humphrey was not unhappy. Indeed, in some ways he had never been happier. The monks hardly spoke, so he was not plagued with questions, critique, or even inanities. In the isolated little monastery there were no problems, no crises, no threats, no risks, nothing but peace. One heard Mass five times a day, and in between one ate, slept, and did household chores like cleaning, tending the kitchen garden, preparing meals, and darning clothes. The monks here spun and wove their own cloth. They also grew vegetables and raised ducks and chickens. Humphrey was not confronted by his failure here—until he looked up from scattering feed to the cackling and fluttering chickens and saw his former father-in-law coming toward him.

In his astonishment he exclaimed, "Uncle Balian!" It was a form of address that he'd picked up from Isabella when they were still children imprisoned at Kerak under the iron fist of his stepfather, Reynald de Châtillon. He had not used it since that horrible day in Acre when Ibelin had turned his back on him. All because he'd supported Lusignan's usurpation in 1186.

It made no sense that he was here in this isolated Greek monastery.

Ibelin started visibly at being called “Uncle Balian,” but then his face softened and he came forward more quickly. “Humphrey, I hardly recognized you in those robes.”

It was true Humphrey was dressed as a monk, but that was not the reason Balian had failed to recognize him. Balian had not immediately realized he was facing Humphrey because Toron looked twice his age. He was thin, haggard, frail, and losing his hair.

“Are you here—because of me?” Humphrey asked in disbelief. When Father Andronikos said his “friends” had not forgotten him, he had not once thought of his former father-in-law. Aimery de Lusignan, even Henri de Brie, but never Balian.

“Yes. Father Neophytos has released you to me. You can come back to Paphos with me. If we leave now, we should be back before nightfall.”

“Paphos?” Humphrey asked.

“Yes; my lady is there. She will be very relieved to see you safe and sound.”

“Isabella’s mother?” Humphrey asked, dazed.

“Yes,” Ibelin assured him, beginning to think Humphrey was not right in the head.

Humphrey shook his head. He couldn’t bear the thought of facing the Dowager Queen. She had been the one who talked Isabella into turning on him. She had been the one who told Isabella that she must choose between her crown and her husband. And even worse. Humphrey instinctively took a step backwards, away from Ibelin. Isabella, he was thinking, probably told her mother that he had never consummated their marriage. The Dowager Queen knew he had failed to fulfill his marital duties. The others might suspect—they might call him a sodomist in their ignorance—but she *knew* the truth.

“You cannot think that my lady holds anything against you.” Ibelin tried to reason with Humphrey, dismayed by his reaction.

Humphrey shook his head ambiguously, and then announced, “I don’t want to leave. I am happy here.”

Ibelin frowned slightly and glanced over his shoulder at Georgios. His squire could only shake his head to indicate he was as perplexed as his lord.

“I should have been a monk!” Humphrey burst out in an unintended confession. He had not really thought about it before this moment—but suddenly, confronted with the choice between staying with the monks at this isolated monastery and returning to the pressures and humiliations of his former life, he realized that it was *before* he came here that he’d worn the wrong clothes. He had played the wrong role

his whole life.

"I was never good at fighting," he reminded Ibelin. And chastity, he added silently, suited him better than marriage. His failings in the bedchamber had always disappointed Isabella. They had turned her against him. If he had not been expected to consummate their marriage, they could have remained best friends, just as when they were still children. To Ibelin he said defiantly, "You never valued my strengths—that I could read and write in three languages, that I had read the works of the ancients, that I could write poetry and play instruments. . . ."

"You are wrong, Humphrey," Balian answered solemnly. "I did—and do—value your intelligence and your studiousness. I always defended you, even to others, as a good soul. What I could not condone was that you should become king—not after you betrayed us at Nablus. You bear the blame for Hattin, for the loss of Jerusalem, for the slaughter of thousands and the enslavement of many more—"

"DO YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT?" Humphrey shouted at him. "Do you think there is a night that I sleep in peace? You have no idea of my nightmares! I had to watch them slaughtering the Templars and Hospitallers! They haunt me constantly! I spend half my waking hours begging their forgiveness. And the forgiveness of God."

They stared at one another for a moment, and then Ibelin took a deep breath and nodded. "If that is so, then it is indeed best that you stay here where you can pray in peace—assuming you truly feel safe here?"

"I have rarely felt so safe, or so at peace, in all my life," Humphrey answered, so sincerely he sounded almost angry.

Ibelin nodded. "Then, if that is what you want, I will leave you here. I must return to Nicosia to bring word to Aimery of what we must do to bring peace to this island."

Humphrey nodded. "Yes. That is what I want." He sounded defiant, even a little petulant, as he declared this, and in his eyes was a challenge, as if he dared Ibelin to contradict him.

Balian, however, with an inward wince of contrition, recognized that it was guilt, not captivity, that had ravaged Humphrey's young face and body. As he recognized that, he felt the anger he had carried with him for far too long seep away like melting snow. As his anger dissipated, his heart softened as well. It was past time to forgive Humphrey for his betrayal.

Balian crossed the distance between them. Before Humphrey knew what was happening, he embraced him. "I am sorry that you were your father's only son," he told Humphrey earnestly. "Sorry you were

forced to bear a cross too heavy for you. I have judged you too harshly, and I ask you to forgive me for that. I should have been more understanding." He paused to let the words sink in before adding, "I will tell Isabella that you are at last where you belong, and at peace. It will be a comfort to her, because she loves you still."

"Truly?" Humphrey asked, brightening at the mere thought.

"Truly," Balian told him, drawing back to look him in the eye. It was, he thought, the least he could do for a young man who had suffered far too much only for being what he was, rather than what he should have been.

Chapter Sixteen
The Light at Dawn

Nicosia,
April 1195

ESCHIVA LOVED THE WALLED GARDEN. IT had a fountain in the center, cypress trees in the corners, and potted palms, hibiscus, and oleander in the arches of the surrounding arcade. Protected from the wind, it was never really cold, and the arcade offered shade, ensuring it was never too hot, either. Here she could sit and spin or sew while Joscelyn read or sang to her.

Although the youth could walk again, the injury had been too severe for him to fully recover the strength and agility needed to resume an active life. A future as a Mamluke was as closed to him as a future as a knight or even a squire. He would remain a quasi-invalid with a severe limp the rest of his life. Surprisingly, he had accepted this fate with far more equanimity than his mother or anyone else had expected. It seemed as if the injury had resolved his conflict of loyalty. Now that he could serve neither his "master" al-Adil nor his "lord" the Baron of Ibelin, Joscelyn was free to choose a profession that did not involve taking sides at all. He was determined to become a surgeon or apothecary, although it was not yet settled where and how such an undertaking could be arranged and financed. Meanwhile he served as a willing companion to Eschiva, while Beatrice handled the day-to-day running of the household.

Eschiva sometimes felt guilty for not being more active in the household, but she still felt very weak—almost perpetually exhausted—and occasionally still had dizzy spells. She presumed this was because she was pregnant again, and her fear of losing this latest child made her all the more cautious. She was determined to carry this child to term even if it meant she hardly set foot outside her chamber, let alone the palace. After this next child was born, she promised herself, she would take up her duties as Lady of Cyprus. Just another five months, and she would be become more active. . . .

Voices echoed in the passageway to her right, and she looked up to see Aimery burst in. He was dressed for riding in leather boots and

hose. His hair was windblown, his face reddened by the sun and exertion. “My love!” He strode across the garden toward her, and pushed her down as she tried to rise to greet him. “Sit! Sit! I’ll join you.” He dropped down on the bench at her side, and took her hand in both of his. “Geoffrey’s ship put into Kyrenia at last! He delivered a formal written renunciation of his rights to Cyprus or anywhere else in Outremer!”

Eschiva was surprised by how elated her husband sounded. “Did you ever doubt Magnussen’s word?” she asked.

“*I* didn’t, but Barlais and Cheneché certainly did!” Aimery reminded her. “Now they have both caved in and are vying with one another to assure me they supported me all along! Hypocritical bastards!” Aimery was grinning as he spoke, betraying how much his relief outweighed his resentment.

“I saw Renier de Jubail off as well,” Aimery continued, dropping his voice slightly and glancing at Joscelyn.

“Leave us, Joscelyn,” Eschiva suggested with a smile, and the youth dutifully set the book on the bench and slipped out. Aimery watched him go, and then got up and followed to make sure he wasn’t lurking in the passageway. Apparently he was, because Eschiva heard her husband say, “Go on! Fetch me lime sherbet and pistachios!”

Returning, Aimery sat down beside Eschiva, took her hand again, and continued, “The Archdeacon of Latakia sailed two days ago with my message to the Pope, and Jubail put to sea yesterday with my letter to Emperor Henry VI.”

Eschiva was very supportive of her husband’s appeal to the Pope to elevate Cyprus to a kingdom. She recognized the advantages to her husband and her son, when the time came, of being crowned and anointed. She also saw that it was important to establish Cyprus’ independence from Jerusalem—as long as Henri de Champagne was king there. Although Aimery’s arrest by Champagne had been brief—thanks to the intercession of her uncle and other members of the High Court—she could not forgive Champagne for what he had done. The mere thought of that night when he sent men to drag her husband from his bed for a crime he had not committed made her blood boil. She was as determined as her husband, if not more, that he never again bend his knee to Champagne. If they ever met again, she vowed to herself, it would be as equals.

She was less comfortable, however, with the idea of Aimery ceding Cyprus to the Holy Roman Empire and doing homage to the Holy Roman Emperor for it. Aimery had explained the logic: he needed protection from Constantinople, which had never accepted Isaac Comnenus’ secession from the Greek Empire or Richard of England’s

conquest, much less Templar or Lusignan rule. Twice the Greek Emperors had equipped and sent fleets to regain control of the island. Aimery was convinced that the rebels, too, had ties to Constantinople. He needed an ally against Constantinople, an ally strong enough to deter attack. Jerusalem, Tripoli, and Antioch were too weak to help them—and Aimery would *never* ask a favor of Champagne anyway. The Armenians were gaining strength, but they were not a seafaring people, and so not much help if faced with a fleet from Constantinople. The Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, on the other hand, had a tradition of hostility toward Constantinople, and he now controlled Sicily, which had a powerful fleet.

Eschiva understood all that, but she still detested the man for the way he'd treated the English King. She considered Henry VI a treacherous, unscrupulous rat, and she didn't like the thought of her husband taking an oath of fealty to him. But she had voiced her reservations as forcefully as she dared earlier, and held her tongue now.

"With luck, we could have an answer before the sailing season closes. Maybe in time for your next confinement," Aimery announced, laying a hand on her belly with a smile. Eschiva smiled back and put her hand on top of her husband's for a moment. It pleased her that he was taking such a strong interest in this child. It was their seventh, after all. Many men lost interest after they had secured an heir, and Guy was growing like a beanstalk at the moment, thriving visibly.

"I've decided to christen him Hugh, after the founder of the Lusignan dynasty," Aimery declared, patting her belly before removing his hand.

"And if it's a girl?" Eschiva asked.

"Then we'll name her after you," he answered with a shrug. "But this one is a boy. I'm sure of it."

Eschiva nodded, knowing that he couldn't possibly know.

"The other thing I wanted to tell you is that Ibelin thinks he has a solid agreement."

Eschiva sat up straighter and held her breath. For three weeks her uncle had been negotiating with the abbot of Antiphonitis and Father Neophytos on Aimery's behalf. "The Greeks want us to celebrate 'reconciliation' in a joint Mass in their cathedral with the Archbishop officiating." Aimery's tone reflected his uncertainty.

"There's no harm in that," Eschiva encouraged him.

"It means kneeling down in front of their archbishop."

"It means kneeling down before *Our Lord*!" Eschiva corrected him firmly.

Aimery nodded his head, but his expression suggested he remained unconvinced. “They want a public display of us recognizing their church and clergy. They specifically demanded that not only all my knights participate, but that you and Guy do so as well.”

“That’s a good sign,” Eschiva told him.

“How? What do you mean?”

“The participation of your son and heir is intended to bind him publicly and in the eyes of God to this agreement, but it is also a pledge by the Greek clergy to recognize *him* as your heir.”

“I worry that such a public pageant—procession on foot from here to the cathedral and back, not to mention a three-hour church service—will exhaust you,” Aimery admitted, his eyes full of worry. It had not escaped him that Eschiva had not recovered from her miscarriage, nor that she was paler than ever he remembered, her skin almost transparent.

Eschiva reached up and hooked her hand behind his neck to draw his face down for a kiss. “Thank you for worrying about me,” she told him warmly, before releasing his head and declaring in a more practical tone, “Did you know Maria Zoë found her coronation robe in a chest here when she was doing the inventory? She sold it to Isaac Comnenus back in 1188, when she and Uncle Balian had lost everything after Hattin. Isaac, being a usurper, was keen to have anything that hinted at legitimacy, and Maria Zoë exploited his insecurity to sell him first her coronation crown and then her coronation robe. Richard of England apparently took and kept the crown, but didn’t have an eye for women’s clothes. He probably didn’t even think to look for valuables in the clothing chests of Isaac’s wife! Maria Zoë found it, but she has outgrown it, of course: it was made for a thirteen-year-old. I certainly can’t wear it in my condition, but Burgundia would look lovely in it. It is in the style of the Eastern Empire, with broad bands of gold embroidery studded with pearls.” She smiled up at her husband.

Aimery considered her with a bemused expression. “You’re saying not only that you want me to go through with this, but also that you want me to bring our younger children to Cyprus, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. It’s time for them to start identifying with this island as their future.

“It’s the best white wine on the whole island,” John declared enthusiastically as he poured for his parents. They were celebrating

the successful conclusion of a peace agreement between the Greek Patriarch and Aimery de Lusignan in private. The real spirit behind the agreement had been Father Neophytos, but he had no official position, and the Patriarch was recognized by the entire Greek population as an authority. Ibelin, however, was in some ways even more gratified by the fact that his nephew Henri, along with Barlais and Cheneché, had also embraced the peace. The latter expressed doubts about whether the peace would hold, but all agreed that it was worth trying.

Balian himself was astonished by how good he genuinely felt. His last two forays into diplomacy had ended "successfully"—but at incredible cost. The first, the surrender of Jerusalem in 1187, had saved the lives and freedom of three-quarters of the Christian population, but left the Holy City itself and its poorest inhabitants in Saracen hands. The second, the Treaty of Ramla in 1192, had secured the coast of the Levant for the Franks, but left his own heritage of Ibelin and Ramla and his wife's dower of Nablus in Saracen hands. The agreement they celebrated today (not a treaty, as it was not between sovereign powers) was far more modest. It might not even find a mention in the chronicles, but it was more satisfying because Balian could see no drawbacks to it.

The Greek churches were to retain not only their structures but their tithes, and Latin churches would be built on royal land and draw revenues from land allotted to them from the royal domain. Furthermore, the laws of Manuel I were to be reinstated, with all customs, taxes, and tolls at the same rates as in the last year of his reign. The penalties for criminal and civil offenses for the Greek population were likewise to be restored to those of the last Comnenus; only treason and other crimes against the "Crown" were to be tried in Latin courts on the basis of the laws of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which were to apply generally to the Frankish and other immigrant populations.

Maria Zoë lifted a red glass goblet, with crosses of gold enameled into it, and toasted her husband. "My lord! To the finest diplomat in Christendom!"

"With the grace of God," he modified before sipping the wine. His eyes widened and as he set the goblet down and he turned to his firstborn son to exclaim, "That *is* good! Where is it from?"

"A village called Paradisi." John pronounced it in the Greek fashion, as "Paradhisi." "It's on the south coast just east of the ruins of Salamis."

"We need to secure *barrels* of it," Balian concluded.

"I can see about that," John agreed with a smile. "But shouldn't I

first take word to Father Andronikos about this agreement?"

His father dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand. "Father Andronikos isn't important anymore. His intervention saved us from further bloodshed, and God will bless him for that, but at this point he has no further role to play."

"I know," John conceded, "but we should at least have the courtesy to tell him about the agreement and thank him."

"I thanked him most emphatically the very day that Father Neophytos agreed to intercede. Being a man of peace, the agreement itself is his greatest gratification."

"I'm sure," John agreed again, "but surely he has a right to hear the terms?"

"He'll hear them from his bishop, as will all the other priests on the island."

"But shouldn't he hear it *first*," John insisted (his tone was becoming decidedly impertinent), "since he was partly responsible? Surely you see—"

"What I see is a young man talking back to his father!" Balian snapped. "I've given you a great deal of freedom, John. Don't think that gives you the right to talk back to me as you never would have done to Lord Aimery. Don't forget you're still only fifteen, and you aren't knighted yet."

"I don't see what this has to do with my age or whether I'm knighted or not," John rejoined stubbornly, his jaw hardening in a way so similar to Balian's that Maria Zoë thought she was seeing her husband at fifteen. "All I said was that Father Andronikos deserves to hear about this agreement before—"

"I'm not deaf, and I can't see why this means so much to you—unless the real reason you want to ride halfway across the island is to see Father Andronikos' *daughter*."

This accusation took Maria Zoë completely by surprise, but the way John flushed and then started denying it in a breathless rush of outrage made it all too obvious that Balian had hit a nerve.

"*Now* we're at the root of things," Balian declared, sitting back and crossing his arms. "I hereby forbid you from *ever* going back to Kolossi! I won't have you dishonoring me—or such an honorable man of God as Father Andronikos—by debauching his innocent daughter!"

"Balian!" Maria Zoë exclaimed in shock. His accusation seemed groundless and his tone unjustified. But before she could say anything in the defense of her son, John jumped to his feet and shouted at his father, "You're not being fair! What have I ever done to make you think I'd dishonor Eirini? I'm not Haakon Magnussen or Amalric! You

have no right—"

"I have every right!" Balian barked back, raising his own voice in face of so much impudence. "And if you keep on like this, I'll have you flogged."

"I'm not a child!" John shouted. "I won't stand here and let you insult me and humiliate me!" With these words, John flung his chair over on its side and strode toward the door. Despite his father's shout to turn around and come back, John charged out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

"He's going to regret this!" Balian announced with controlled anger, his jaw clenched.

"Frankly," Maria Zoë countered pointedly, "I think John was perfectly justified! You *were* being unfair. You have no grounds for imputing such dishonorable behavior to John. He has never been anything but honest, upright, and chivalrous in his dealings—"

"You haven't a clue what goes on inside a fifteen-year-old boy!" Balian scoffed. "They're all ruled by their loins, and when it comes to an attractive girl, they think with what's between their legs. I can't, and won't, risk having John shatter everything I've worked for! Imagine it: a Frankish youth rapes a Greek priest's daughter! The island would explode—"

"John isn't going to rape *anyone*, much less Father Andronikos' daughter!" Maria Zoë protested, losing her temper.

"Rape, seduce. What difference does it make? It—"

"Let me tell *you* that the difference is like to the difference between heaven and hell!" Maria Zoë cut him off furiously. "If you don't recognize that, then you're no better than—"

"This isn't about what the *girl* feels!" Balian cut her off. "It's about the way it would be *perceived* and *exploited* by the likes of Brother Zotikos! I don't give a damn if the girl seduces and rapes John! If she's deflowered by a Frank, everything I've worked for these past weeks is ruined!" Balian jumped to his feet and paced to the far side of the room to stand with his back to his wife.

Maria Zoë took a deep breath to get a grip on her anger. While she remained convinced that Balian was completely in the wrong, she also recognized that this outburst had more to do with his inner fears that something could still go wrong. She wanted to reassure her husband, and she wanted to reconcile him with his firstborn. She just wasn't sure how. The silence extended from seconds to minutes.

At last Balian turned around and returned to the table. He didn't sit, just took his glass and sipped from it standing. At last he looked at his wife, and the reproach in her eyes irritated him. "I know John doesn't

intend to do anyone any harm," he told her firmly. "I know he's exceptionally responsible and mature for his age, but he's playing with fire and doesn't even know it! He doesn't *know* how unutterably powerful sexual desire can be!"

"Come," Maria Zoë tried to reason. "Are you saying you wouldn't have been able to control yourself at his age?" Maria Zoë tried to make it a joke, but it fell flat.

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying! Damn it! Why did he choose this time and this girl to lust after?"

"I expect," Maria Zoë observed dryly, "that he didn't *choose* either. Love is notorious for taking us all by surprise when and where we least expect it. I hardly intended to fall in love with a landless knight, either, you know. But let's not assume the worst. Sit down and drink with me. You forbade John from going to Kolossi. He won't defy you. He's a good boy."

But that's exactly what John did. He stormed out of the confrontation with his father, went to his chamber and packed a bunch of things in a saddlebag. He took all the money he owned, and then went to the stables, with Barry anxiously at his heels. Just as on that night when Lord Aimery had been arrested two years ago, he saddled his stallion in the dark and set off into the night. Now, as then, no one thought to stop the son and heir of Balian d'Ibelin.

He had ridden far beyond Nicosia and was on the treacherous highway to Limassol before the anger had burned itself out enough for him to moderate his pace and take stock of his situation. A part of his brain suggested he should turn around and return to Nicosia rather than pursue open defiance. He could express his indignation in other ways. He could seek his mother's intervention. He could appeal to Lord Aimery and Eschiva. He could treat his father with icy-cold politeness, freezing any attempt at friendliness.

But after considering his options, he concluded he couldn't go back. The injustice of his father's accusation drove him forward. He had never, *ever* done anything that anyone in their right mind might interpret as dishonorable when it came to women.

Taking pity on Troubadour and a lagging Barry, however, he dismounted, removed the saddle and bridle, and hobbled the horse where there was plenty of grass. He lay down on the saddle and took Barry into his arms (something the dog loved) to help keep him warm. Eventually he put himself to sleep with imaginary conversations in

which he defended himself to his father. At dawn he rose unrested, re-tacked Troubadour, and set off again, with Barry loping along, tongue hanging out, at their heels.

John was beginning to fear his father would send men after him to bring him home, so he avoided villages as much as possible. He skirted any habitation, riding through open countryside. He paid a shepherd to share some cheese and bread with him, paying far too much and giving half to Barry. He regretted setting off in his Frankish clothes, remembering nostalgically his adventures in Greek attire.

On the second night he begged the hospitality of a peasant family. They were far too terrified of a Frankish "knight" to say no. Again he paid handsomely, particularly for meat for Barry, because he knew they had little to share. In return the housewife served him a generous breakfast and gave him bread and cheese for the next stage of his journey.

John spent his third night in Limassol, but far from the Templar commandery where he might be recognized and arrested on his father's orders, seeking a humble hostel instead. The other guests were mostly old, decrepit, and poor, and they looked askance at him and his big dog, but his silver remained welcome. The snoring and smells of the other guests in the common room, however, sent John to sleep in the stable. He climbed up into the hayloft and made his bed there, with Barry as his pillow.

In the morning he gave Barry a washing in a fountain and then found a bathhouse for himself. He indulged in a thorough cleaning and a haircut. He sent his underwear and shirt to a laundry while he steamed away the grime of the road. Thus it was midmorning before he embarked on the last stage of his journey to the village beyond Kolossi where Father Andronikos lived.

By now a new kind of nervousness had overtaken him. What if Eirini wasn't glad to see him? What if her father shared his father's views of his intentions?

He had already resolved to pretend he was representing his father and had come to share the terms of the agreement, but that wouldn't give him any excuse to be alone with Eirini. . . .

John's changing thoughts and moods produced an erratic pace. Sometimes he pressed ahead eagerly. Sometimes he slowed to a walk as he rehearsed speeches and imagined encounters in his head. He had already passed the turnoff to Kolossi when abruptly, out of a grove of trees, an armed knight burst out to block the road in front of him. John reached for his hilt as his heart leapt into his throat. It didn't help that he recognized Sir Galvin almost at once. John was (naively) more afraid of his father's wrath than he was of robbers.

“Been taking our sweet time about this trip, haven’t we?” Sir Galvin mocked with a grin as he blocked the road.

John drew up. Sir Galvin was bigger, stronger, and more experienced in combat. He also rode a larger and heavier horse. Nor did it help that Barry recognized Sir Galvin as the man who often gave him scraps of meat and started wagging his tail in delight. The dog would be no help to him now, and John did not stand much of a chance trying to force his way through anyway. He didn’t try. Instead he called out defiantly, “I’m not going to just turn around and go docilely back with you! You’ll have to tie and gag me.”

“Now why would I want to do that, laddie?” Sir Galvin asked with a grin. “You father simply suggested you shouldn’t be riding about on your own at your tender age.” That was a provocative and calculated insult, John noted furiously as the old knight continued, “He sent me to *escort* you.”

Damn him! John thought resentfully. Now he would have someone watching his every move and word when he was with Eirini! He glowered sullenly at Sir Galvin for half a minute, while trying to think what he could do or say to shake off this unwanted “nursemaid,” but his brain was empty. After another half-minute he conceded defeat and nodded.

Sir Galvin turned his horse on his haunches and fell in beside John, Barry trotting happily beside them, and John rode the remaining mile to the village where Father Andronikos lived in resentful silence. They arrived as the priest was ringing the little bell in the rectangular frame over the church door. He smiled and waved at them. “Welcome, welcome! Join me in thanking the dear Lord for your lord father, young Janis. He has worked a miracle.”

“Did you *tell* him already?” John hissed furiously at Sir Galvin.

“How else was I to explain my presence?” Sir Galvin defended himself. “I was sure you would get here ahead of me, given your head start, so I rushed in, only to discover no one had seen hide nor hair of you. It was very awkward—especially considering my nearly nonexistent Greek. All I could do was stammer ‘*ola kala, o baron exei epitichi*’ or something like that.” (Everything’s good, the baron was successful.) While Sir Galvin’s French remained heavily accented by his native Scottish burr, his Greek was so badly mispronounced that John wondered how anyone could understand it at all; had he been in a better mood he would have laughed.

Meanwhile they both dismounted, tied up their horses, and proceeded into the church to join the women, children, and elderly streaming from various houses to the church for Mass. The men were evidently in the fields.

Father Andronikos' wife was in the first row on the women's side of the church, and Eirini was beside her. Eirini turned to see who had entered, and her face lit up into a smile before she covered her mouth with her hand and then hastened to face the screens. After that she dutifully kept her eyes ahead, crossing herself, kneeling, and giving the responses like a good priest's daughter.

John, however, couldn't keep his attention on the Mass. He looked over at Eirini so often that Sir Galvin stomped on his foot and hissed at him to "stop making a scene." John concentrated on the Mass for at least thirty seconds after that, but then he looked over again and this time met Eirini's eyes. She blushed sharply as she turned back to the front, only to look over her shoulder at him again almost at once.

Now he was sure! She was as excited to see him as he to see her.

When the Mass concluded, John crossed the aisle to bow before Eirini and her mother. He tried to direct his words to the elder woman, but he simply couldn't keep his eyes off Eirini. She stood demurely with her eyes down—except when she snuck little glances at him, her cheeks so infused with blood that they were the color of roses.

Father Andronikos came up behind John and Sir Galvin. Clapping his hands together, he suggested, "Come! Let us celebrate together."

"Yes, please. I so wanted to be the one to bring you the news—but Sir Galvin, I understand, beat me here."

"No matter, Janis," Father Andronikos assured him. "He couldn't tell me any details. I heard from Father Neophytos, however, that you accompanied your father to most of the negotiations." Father Andronikos sounded impressed, and John's chest swelled with pride because Eirini's eyes grew wide with wonder.

"Just as his squire," John hastened to explain, anxious not to seem like a braggart.

"Of course; what else at your age?" Father Andronikos remarked genially. "But very few young men have such an opportunity to be a witness to history. It must have been very exciting. You must tell us all about it!" He herded his guests, wife, and daughter toward his modest house, the Franks leading their horses, and Barry wagging his tail in anticipation of food.

Once inside, however, the women disappeared into the kitchen, and John could hardly discontinue his narrative and insist on waiting for Eirini. Fortunately, he hadn't got all that far in the story before Eirini emerged with a tray of refreshments. As she came to offer them to him, she briefly stood between her father and John, her back to her father, and she risked smiling straight at him. John felt as if his bones

were melting, but he didn't dare say a word. He took a cup with a murmured "Thank you," and Eirini continued to Sir Galvin. Unfortunately, she returned to the kitchen as soon as the men all had something to drink, but John had to continue his narrative.

Eirini next returned with nuts and raisins, and after a few more minutes, she emerged to set the table. John sat a little straighter and spoke as loudly as he could without (he thought) being too obvious. Eirini studiously focused on the table, but she was so slow about her duties that her mother called out from the kitchen, asking what was keeping her. She finished in a hurry and darted back to the kitchen, only to re-emerge a few minutes later with two steaming platters of food. Her mother came after her, and Father Andronikos invited his guests to the table. He asked them all to join hands while he blessed the food, then with a smile gestured for them to sit. As he served, he launched into a lengthy speech about how delighted he was about the outcome of the negotiations.

"There's only one thing that disturbs me," Father Andronikos concluded, his tone taking on a serious note, in contrast to the optimistic tone that had prevailed up until now.

"Yes?" John asked attentively.

"Brother Zotikos," Father Andronikos answered, "has refused to accept the agreement."

"But his abbot," John started, "he—I mean—Brother Zotikos can't disobey . . . "

Father Andronikos took a deep breath and shook his head. "He should not—but, if what I have heard is right, he got very angry and accused the abbot and, indeed, the Patriarch of taking Frankish bribes. He said that they might be "corruptible," but he was not. He stormed out and has not been seen since. There are rumors. . . ."

"Yes?" John pressed him.

"He was very close to some notorious smugglers—not to say pirates. Particularly a man who goes by the name of Kanakes. It was his boat that brought Brother Zotikos to that first rendezvous with your father in Coral Bay."

John remembered that day vividly, and the way his father had said they all looked like a "bunch of pirates."

"Zotikos has vowed to continue the fight," Father Andronikos admitted with a sigh.

"Then this isn't peace?" John asked, confused.

"No, no. It's not as bad as that. The Patriarch has sanctioned this agreement and ordered the people to respect it. The vast majority of people want peace and truly praise Our Lord and Savior for this

agreement. Things will calm down. I just wanted to warn you that Brother Zotikos may yet try to cause trouble. Now, if you're done, why don't you let me take you to see the ruins I told you about during your last visit? That way we won't be underfoot while the women clean up."

John very much *wanted* to be with the women, but he had no choice but to assent. Dutifully he followed Father Andronikos to an overgrown site on the edge of the village where, among the weeds, capitals of marble pillars and fragments of mosaic were visible. "Cyprus was very important in the centuries before Christ," Father Andronikos explained as Barry sniffed about, excited by a thousand scents. "There were powerful kings who ruled from Salamis and Paphos." John listened politely as Father Andronikos gave him a history lesson, but he heard with only half an ear; his mind was focused on how he could find time alone with Eirini.

By the time they returned it was late afternoon, and Father Andronikos excused himself to prepare Mass, heading straight for his little church. John's hope of a moment with Eirini were dashed, however, by the sight of Sir Galvin blocking the doorway. "It's time to head back for Limassol," he announced with a meaningful look; "otherwise we won't make it before dark."

"But we can—"

"It would be most improper to impose on these poor people, John. They've shared more than they can afford already. It's time to go. *Now*." He was very firm.

"But we can't go without taking leave of Father Andronikos, and he's in the church," John protested.

"If you explain things to his wife, she will understand and tell him we have left. Tell her we must get back to Nicosia, *or your father will have your hide*." Sir Galvin enunciated very precisely with a fake smile. "Now I'll go tack up the horses, and you go tell Madame Priest we're leaving."

Fuming inwardly, John entered the little house, calling out as he entered, *"Kireea?"* (My lady).

He was answered by Eirini, who came toward him with her finger to her lips. "She's napping," Eirini told him in a whisper.

At last! They were alone together, and just a foot apart. John felt his throat close so tight he couldn't breathe. His pulse was racing. "Eirini!" he whispered.

She gazed up at him with wide, dark, expectant eyes.

John licked his lips. "Eirini. I love you!" He gasped out.

She went on tiptoe and pecked at his cheek with a little kiss in

answer. Then, just as she was about to dart away, ashamed of her own audacity, John caught her, pulled her back into his arms, and held her for a moment of sheer ecstasy. “I have to go,” he murmured into her ear, holding her tighter still, “but I’ll be back. Trust me. I love you.”

Now she lifted her face to his, and he bent his own to place a kiss on her lips. He had never known anything like this. He didn’t want it to end. Not the embrace or the kiss or—

“John! I’m waiting for you!” Sir Galvin shouted from the yard.

“I have to go!” John whispered, pulling back. “I have to go, but I’ll be back. I love you!”

“I love you, too!” Eirini answered, glowing with the same excitement that had overwhelmed John.

“John! Do you want me to come in and get you?” Sir Galvin threatened.

John dropped a last, fleeting kiss on Eirini’s lips and fled out the door, almost tripping over a stool and wooden clogs just inside the entry.

Sir Galvin was already mounted, sitting with one hand on his hip and Troubadour’s reins in the other. Barry was panting at Troubadour’s heels. At the sight of John, Sir Galvin just shook his head. “It’s going to be damned uncomfortable riding in the state you’re in, but at least I can see you didn’t have time to spill it in the wrong place. Come on. Mount up.”

John obeyed, too dazed by all the sensations surging through him to resist. As Sir Galvin picked up a trot past the little church, John turned and looked back over his shoulder at the priest’s house. Had Eirini been in the doorway, he would have ridden back to her at once, willing to face any fate *whatever* just to hold her in his arms again, but she was not. John turned forward and reluctantly urged Troubadour to a trot to catch up with Sir Galvin.

“I’m not sure your father would approve,” Sir Galvin remarked as John fell in beside him, “but I’ve found that when I’m inflamed with passion for a woman I *can’t* have, it helps to comfort my body with a woman that I *can*. If you want, we can stop at a place I know in Limassol where the girls are clean, pretty, and totally lacking in virtue.”

John didn’t answer, but he nodded wordlessly. He had to learn more about this whole business of physical attraction to the opposite sex.

Chapter Seventeen
The Old Kingdom

Sidon,
June 1195

THE BIRTH AND CHRISTENING OF A son and heir is always a good excuse for a celebration, but the Baron of Sidon had more reason than most for a feast. He was sixty-six years old, and despite two previous marriages, this was the first time a live child had been born to him. In the old man's eyes, to be blessed with a son so late in life was nothing short of a miracle. He knew the life of his infant son was fragile. He knew the infant might not live a month, a year, or a decade, much less more than a half-century as he had. But the baby had been born whole and healthy, and Reginald de Sidon was overwhelmed with joy and pride. He wanted to share his feelings with the whole world.

For his servants and the commoners of Sidon, he ordered the slaughter of two oxen and six sheep, all of which now roasted over open pits in the outer ward. Dozens of trestle tables lined with benches had been set up, and tents erected over them to shield the guests from the summer sun. In addition to the roasted meat, mounds of bread and casks of ale were dished out. A dancing bear, jugglers, fire-eaters, and acrobats were also on hand to entertain the crowd and ensure a festive mood.

In the great hall of the castle, Sidon's tenants and retainers gathered around sideboards laden with mounds of roast pork under crusted fat, heaps of goat soaked in red wine and bay-leaf gravy, and mutton smothered in mint-flavored yogurt. There were loaves of wheat and barley bread, casseroles of carrots and celery baked under a layer of cheese, puddings of umbles spiced with cumin and nutmeg, marzipan cakes, candied fruits, and much more. Each empty platter was replaced with a fresh one, offering either more of the same or something new.

Guests came and went as they pleased. They made their way to the high table to offer their congratulations to the host before partaking of the feast. They chatted with acquaintances and friends at the lower tables. They wandered out to the ward to see the entertainment. Later

in the day a tournament was planned, so many of the younger men were already checking on their horses and equipment.

Tournaments were not common in Outremer, and were nowhere near as popular as in France. Real warfare had been too prevalent for too much of the history of the Latin Kingdom in the Holy Land for anyone to feel a need for mock combat. The truce with the Saracens, however, was almost three years old, and youth was restless. Or, one could argue, the truce was due to expire in less than a year, and it was time to hone one's combat skills again. Either way, the tournament had attracted the chivalry of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in large numbers.

Most of the barons of the High Court had assembled, and not a few of the bishops as well, although the King had sent regrets because Queen Isabella was still in her confinement after the birth of a third daughter, this one christened Alice. At the high table with Sidon were two of the Tiberius brothers, Ralph and Hugh. In addition, the Lord of Caesarea and his heir (both called Walter) had joined their host at the high table. The place of honor, however, had been given to Sidon's father-in-law, the Lord of Caymont, Balian d'Ibelin.

Ibelin was twenty years younger than his son-in-law, which in the circumstances provoked a great deal of good-natured teasing. "You must feel *ancient* being a grandfather!" Reginald ribbed him.

"Being a grandfather is actually quite satisfying," Ibelin countered; "it almost makes me feel like I'm founding a dynasty." The others made dismissive gestures and not very polite noises, and were about to change the subject when Balian added, "What disturbs me is the idea of sleeping with a grandmother."

The remark caught the others by surprise and harvested guffaws of laughter accordingly—until the Lord of Caesarea quipped, with a nod toward the door opening from the solar behind them, "Then again, when the grandmother looks like *that* . . . "

Balian spun about with a guilty conscience and got hastily to his feet, bringing the other men at the high table with him. From Maria Zoë's serene expression, however, he surmised she hadn't heard his joke. Reginald was calling for another chair to be brought, as Ralph of Tiberius chivalrously vacated his own seat for the Dowager Queen.

"Is everything all right?" Reginald asked anxiously.

"Helvis seems to think she's the *first* woman in the *world* to give birth to a son," Maria Zoë answered with a pseudo-disgusted shake of her head. "Honestly," she added, nodding to her husband as he silently offered to pour wine for her, "she practically floats when she walks around the room, and I'm worried the poor little thing will starve to death, because she can hardly let go of him long enough for

the wet nurse to feed him. She wants him in her arms every second. I don't know where she gets it. I was *never* that maternal." She tossed Balian a smile that seemed to contain some private joke, because he laughed.

Then she turned back to the beaming father and declared, "You're going to have trouble with her, Sidon. She now thinks that she can walk on water, that the sun and moon rise at her command, and I don't know what else."

Sidon and Ibelin both laughed at this, as Maria Zoë intended, but she recognized in their laughter a large portion of nervous relief. Sidon quite obviously doted on his pretty young bride, and it did not help that his first wife had died in childbed. It was only natural that he be both very concerned and very relieved that this birth had been comparatively easy and successful.

For Balian, on the other hand, Helvis was his firstborn child, conceived in sin, and still barely seventeen years old. Balian, Maria Zoë knew, had a partially guilty conscience for marrying her to a man old enough to be her grandfather. At the time of the betrothal it had seemed like a blessing because they had lost all their lands to the Saracens, whereas Sidon had a promise of a fief from none other than Saladin himself. The situation had changed with the grant of Caymont, but by then it was too late to break the agreement with Sidon. Besides, Helvis herself had never expressed any dissatisfaction with the proposed marriage. On the contrary, she had very early realized she could get her own way in nearly everything from the besotted Sidon, and she visibly enjoyed her status of married woman and Lady of Sidon.

Inwardly Maria Zoë shook her head over a daughter who was so radically different from herself in almost every way. Helvis had always been a timid child, afraid of horses, and so pious there were times when Balian thought she might have a calling to the Church. Since her marriage she had become completely focused on her husband, her household, and now her baby. She took no interest in anything beyond her little circle. Maria Zoë found that incomprehensible, but she accepted that Helvis was happy in her narrow world.

The Bishop of Sidon, in full episcopal regalia, was making his way across the hall, trailed by a couple of fellow clerics. He mounted the steps to the high table and approached Sidon. "My lord, we are nearly ready for the christening. You can start assembling in the chapel, and have the godmother fetch the child."

Sidon nodded, raised his voice, and announced the message to the larger crowd, while Maria Zoë excused herself to return for the baby. "What have you decided to name him, by the way?" she asked

curiously.

"Oh, didn't Helvis tell you?"

"No, she was being very coy about it. Saying it was to be a surprise."

"Balian, of course," Reginald answered with a grin to his father-in-law. "What else could we call him?"

Balian was surprised by how flattered he felt.

The christening over, the spectators started to drift in the direction of the large field that had been cordoned off for the tournament. This was to be a melee, with two teams competing across an area roughly a mile wide and half a mile deep. It had gullies, wadis, rocks, and scrub brush, just as a real battlefield would have. The objective was to capture or unhorse as many of the opposing knights as possible. Capture was effected by forcing the opponent to surrender or by physically dragging him, with or without his horse, to the area behind the starting line of each respective team. The tournament ended when all members of one or the other team were unhorsed or captured.

Maria Zoë had been mildly surprised that Balian chose not to participate. "This sort of thing isn't for *grandfathers*," he'd replied, adding, "it's for the next generation."

He was probably right, she reflected, but by not participating he also gave John a chance to shine. In ways Maria Zoë could not fully fathom, John and Balian's fight earlier in the year had resulted in a stronger bond between them. Balian, of course, had already recognized by the next day that his son's safety was more important than his obedience. He had sent Sir Galvin not to drag him home, but merely to ensure nothing happened to him. Ever since the incident, which neither of them spoke about, Balian treated John more like an adult. Even more surprising to Maria, John seemed more at ease with his father too. He was less deferential and more self-confident without being disrespectful. In May, in a public ceremony celebrated with as much pomp as they could afford, Balian had knighted John. It was therefore as Sir John d'Ibelin that he would compete in the tournament today.

Another advantage of Balian not taking part in the tournament was that it freed up Georgios to serve as John's squire. Georgios had once been squire to the famous tournament champion William Marshal, during the latter's sojourn in the Holy Land. Georgios still lionized the old tournament master, who had evidently regaled Georgios with many tales of his tournament successes. The squire had been giving John tips ever since they heard about the tournament, and Maria Zoë had the impression that Georgios was at least as (if not more) excited

about the event as John himself.

John would be riding the destrier his father had given him on the occasion of his knighting. He was a young black stallion, a younger brother of Balian's own Ras Dawit, and he had been named Trojan. John, Maria Zoë knew, was more than a little nervous about riding the still-unfamiliar horse in an event like this. The risks of serious injury resulting in the need to put the horse down were very real. At a minimum there could be cuts, abrasions, bruises, strained muscles, wind and bog spavins, or bowed tendons as a result. To not participate, however, would have been to concede defeat before he even started, and John was dogged if nothing else.

With John participating, Philip on Cyprus, and Helvis confined with baby Balian, the Ibelin spectators consisted of only Balian himself, Maria Zoë, Margaret, and Barry. The latter had been entrusted to Meg, to keep him from getting underfoot in the melee. Meg, however, had gone to change, leaving the confused dog with her parents. She now came breathlessly down the spiral stairs from the chamber she was sharing with a half-dozen other noble maidens to join her impatient parents. As a maiden, she wore her hair long and uncovered. She had inherited her mother's curly dark-auburn hair, and had expertly braided two little strands leading back from her temples and from behind her ears to meet in a single braid at the back of her head. This had the effect of pulling her bushy hair away from her face, thereby highlighting its aquiline symmetry, while allowing her generous and luxurious tresses to explode around her shoulders. Added to the natural beauty of the hair itself were little gold wires that she had inserted into her thick hair so that it was highlighted by gold. Her gown was crimson, but the linings of her wide sleeves were the brightest of marigold silk: Ibelin colors.

Balian nearly gasped at the sight of her. What had become of his little girl? He did not remember her being on the brink of womanhood when they left Caymont ten months ago. Had she grown up overnight? Or had he been blind?

Maria Zoë's reaction was far more practical. "You are *not* wearing that gown to the tournament!"

"But it's made of Ibelin colors to support John!" Meg pointed out in astonishment.

"It's very fine silk, cost a fortune, and is *totally* unsuitable! You could have worn it to the christening, but not to a tournament!"

"But it's the prettiest thing I *have*!" Meg countered, revealing her true motives.

"All the more reason you don't want it getting covered in dust, much less risk getting the sleeves or hem torn and trampled on!

Honestly, Meg! Use your head. Now go change, or we'll miss the start!"

Trumpet signals were already sounding, calling the teams to marshal.

"But, Mama—" Meg started to argue.

"Do as your mother says, or you aren't going to the tournament at all," Balian warned.

Meg knew she was defeated when her father weighed in against her, and with a furious expression she turned and ran back up the stairs in an angry huff, frantic to change rapidly. She *had* to be at the start! Sir Walter of Caesarea the younger had whispered to her in the great hall that he wanted to wear her colors!

Left at the foot of the stairs, her father asked her mother, "When did she grow up?"

"Don't deceive yourself, my love, she hasn't. She's still a child. She's only *flirting* with the idea of growing up—without a clue about what it means."

"How old is she?"

"Fourteen," Maria Zoë answered readily, only to pause, surprised, before admitting what she had only just remembered: "A year older than I was when I married King Amalric."

"Hmm." Balian thought about that, too. Maria Zoë had been a very poised, disciplined, and distant young queen. At times she had seemed more like a doll than a human: beautiful but so impassive that she seemed indifferent to everyone around her. It had taken their shared love of a young prince isolated by his leprosy to give Balian a glimpse beyond her façade. He had then discovered what a lively, passionate, and intelligent person she was. Not once, however, had he seen her as a *child*.

"I was forced to grow up fast, just like Helvis. We've let Meg remain a child longer than usual, but I don't regret it."

Already the sound of light footsteps, almost tripping over themselves as they hurried down the stairs, warned them that Meg was returning. She was now dressed more suitably, in a sky-blue linen gown with a sheer green surcoat of Egyptian cotton. "Much better," Maria Zoë praised her, but Meg was still seething with resentment and refused to acknowledge her mother's remark. Instead she took her father's elbow and looked up at him expectantly.

"Um hum," he remarked ambiguously, and then offered his other arm to his wife.

They were late getting to the improvised grandstand beside the

tourney field, and it was already crowded, but people automatically made way for the Dowager Queen of Jerusalem and the Lord of Caymont/Ibelin. They climbed easily to the middle of the bench on the highest rung to settle down next to the host, Reginald de Sidon, and the bishop. Barry had absorbed the excitement and was looking about curiously, his wagging tail slapping spectators in their faces, so that Balian realized he would have to be tied to the base of the grandstands and returned with him.

Meg, meanwhile, was anxiously searching the men lining up on either side of the grandstand on nervous destriers. They wore full armor, which meant nowadays that most of the helmets had visors, and she couldn't see faces anymore. The identity of the rider could only be discerned by the colors and insignia they wore on shields, surcoats, and the trappers of their horses. John had adopted his father's colors and shield: a gold field with a red cross pattée. His surcoat was marigold with red crosses on it, but Trojan's trapper was red with marigold crosses on it. The bright combination made John stand out amidst his fellows. Meg, however, was looking feverishly for Walter of Caesarea, but she wasn't sure of his device. Was it a black falcon or a black tower? She was sure it was black on blue. A knight separated himself from the others and came to the foot of the grandstand, saluting with his lance.

"Meg!" Her mother discreetly trod on Meg's foot to make her pay attention. "The knight requests a token from you."

"But—" Meg broke off, flushing furiously. It wasn't Walter, but Hugh of Tiberius.

"Give him something," her mother told her.

"But—"

"I don't care. A lady does not humiliate a young knight in front of everyone by refusing. *My* daughter certainly won't," she added ominously.

Meg swallowed, pulled from her sleeve the red-and-yellow ribbon she had been saving for Walter, and with a forced smile reached down and tied it to the tip of the offered lance. Sir Hugh bowed his head and saluted her with his hand before riding off.

"Now I don't have anything for Sir Walter," Meg hissed angrily to her mother.

"That's perfectly all right," Maria Zoë assured her with infuriating calm. "Ribbons mean absolutely nothing in the real world." Maria Zoë knew that Meg had been devouring romances this past year. "In the real world," she continued, "your father will choose your husband for you, and it need not be anyone you've ever given a ribbon to."

Meg opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted by the return of her father. Just as he re-seated himself, a trumpet fanfare set the knights cantering in echelon to their starting positions. Compared to the elaborate pageantry of French and Flemish tournaments, this was a very crude affair. There were no heralds, for a start—but then again, in this close-knit society everyone knew everyone anyway, and heralds were hardly necessary. There was also no parade of knights. They cantered to the start positions, and at a renewed trumpet signal they charged from either end of the field to clash more or less in front of the grandstands.

Within a very short space of time, so much dust had been stirred up that it was increasingly difficult to see anything at all. They could hear shouts, occasional threats or insults, the clash of weapons, and the snorting and whinnying of horses—and Barry's frantic barking. Now and then a horse and rider appeared on the periphery, usually turning to return to the fray. A couple of men staggered out on foot, one limping badly, and the barber-surgeon immediately went to his aid. Riderless horses also escaped the cloud of dust, happy to get away from the madness, and were quickly captured by waiting grooms.

Soon the spectators closer to ground level were racked with coughing fits, and Maria Zoë pulled the upper flap of her scarf down from the top of her head to cover her face.

"I can't see a thing," Meg complained impatiently.

"John's still mounted and fighting," her father answered.

Meg didn't dare *say* she didn't care about John, but she was far more interested in what had happened to Sir Walter of Caesarea. She was also getting bored. Since she couldn't really see what was happening, it was not very pleasant sitting out here in the heat and dust. Fortunately, a canvas awning over the grandstands kept them in the shade, but even so, it was June in Palestine and very hot. Meg could feel herself sweating, and inwardly thanked her mother for making her change. She would have ruined her beautiful gold-and-scarlet dress out here.

"Ah!" Her father sprang to his feet, and his wife and daughter looked up at him.

"I think John's down!"

"No, there he is!" Sidon elbowed his son-in-law. Sure enough, John had just ridden out of the dust toward the sidelines, to be greeted by frantic barking from Barry. John was hunched over the saddle, but still in it. As they watched he righted himself, and Georgios trotted over to give him water and a new lance. He drank, thanked the squire, took up the new lance, and turned Trojan around to re-enter the mock conflict.

The dust was slowly beginning to thin and settle, however, as more and more riders were either unhorsed or forced off the field. Of the nearly one hundred knights who had initially clashed, only about a quarter of them were still engaged.

"Which side is winning?" Balian asked Reginald.

"Haven't a clue," Sidon answered honestly. "Next time we should have one side dress up as Saracens. It would make for a more realistic test anyway."

"Who would want to be the Saracens?" Balian countered.

"All right, we can make it English against the French, or Pisans against Genoese. *That* would be realistic!"

They laughed, and in so doing breathed in so much dust that they both started coughing. Maria Zoë signaled for water from one of the waiting pages.

A half-hour later it was over. The team under the Prince of Galilee had won. Still mounted and uncaptured were Ralph of Tiberius, the elder (but not the younger) Caesarea, and John d'Ibelin. It was a very strong showing for such a young knight.

The spectators gratefully climbed down from the bleachers and started drifting back to the castle for refreshments. Balian, however, wanted to congratulate John, and he urged Maria Zoë and Meg to go ahead of him. Maria Zoë agreed, but Meg said she'd wait for him. She released Barry's leash and sat down on the lowest bench with Barry at her feet, gratefully gazing up at her as she petted and scratched him indulgently.

Meanwhile, Balian ducked under the perimeter railing and waved to John, stopping him from returning to the stables. John trotted to meet his father, and flung open his visor as he drew up. He was grinning broadly. Balian stood beside him, patting Trojan on the neck. The horse, dripping sweat, tried to rub his nose on the Baron of Ibelin, shoving him this way and that as he talked to his son. Then, stepping back, Balian signaled for John to return to the castle just as Barry broke free of Meg and streaked across the field, barking wildly in greeting as he caught sight of John.

As he joined his daughter, Balian was smiling almost as broadly as his son, and he gladly gave Meg his arm. Now that her mother was not around, Meg leaned her head on her father's upper arm. "Daddy?"

"Yes, dove?"

"I know Helvis is very happy, but . . . "

"But what?" Balian was already frowning slightly, afraid of what was to come.

"Well, we're different."

"You think I haven't noticed?"

"No, I just mean . . . "

"What?"

"Well, when you start looking for a husband for me . . . "

"Ah. Yes?"

"I really do like Walter of Caesarea the younger."

"Hmm. Aiming high."

"What do you mean?"

"He's heir to Caesarea. The lordship includes the port of the same name, which used to be very prosperous before Hattin. Although it hasn't recovered fully by any means, there's no reason to think it won't. It once owed one hundred knights to the feudal levee—compared to ten for Ibelin or a mere six for Caymont. In short, you'd better lower your expectations, child." The use of the word 'child' said it all. He was not taking her seriously.

Meg tightened her jaw (much as her brother and father did) and considered her answer carefully. At last she settled for, "Well, will you promise me my husband won't be as *old* as Reggie?"

"No. I won't promise you anything, dove. Marriage is politics and very rarely takes affection or attraction into account; it's about land and alliances. So don't wish for it too soon. Enjoy your freedom instead."

Tyre, July 1195

Ayyub crawled out from under the nailed-together pieces of rubbish that he used as a roof and brushed the worst creases and dirt from his kaftan. He slid his feet into his dilapidated sandals, and then ran a wooden comb through his long hair before tying it with twine at the back of his neck. Rubbing his cheeks, he measured the stubble, and could only hope that today he would earn enough for a bath and a shave.

The thought drove him forward. Yesterday he'd heard rumors that work would at last begin on the expansion of the sea wall. The Archbishop had engaged a master builder, and people said he would be recruiting laborers at prime today. With a glance toward the east, Ayyub increased his pace. He didn't want to be late and risk not getting a job.

As he came around the corner, his heart sank. There were already at least two score men clustered inside the main gate, the "job market" for any construction work in the city. As he watched, a well-dressed man with a clerk in attendance rode up and was immediately besieged by the crowd of job seekers. The master builder waved the supplicants away irritably and gestured for them to line up with their backs to the wall. The scribe dismounted from his mule, withdrew his utensils from a leather pouch attached to his belt, and started down the line of job applicants.

Ayyub had no choice but to go to the end of the line, and he wasn't the last. By the time the clerk reached him, another score of jobless men had joined the lineup. Work for unskilled laborers was scarce in Tyre in 1195.

"Name?" the clerk barked at Ayyub.

"Ayyub ibn Adam," Ayyub answered readily.

"Age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Place of birth?"

"Nablus."

"Any skills?"

"I was an apprentice mason before Hattin."

The clerk looked up and their eyes met. Ayyub saw understanding. The priest nodded once. "Good enough. Join the men over there." He pointed and jotted a note on his scroll. Ayyub gratefully joined the cluster of men selected.

After the clerk had found fifty suitable workers, the hired men were divided up into teams of ten, each under a journeyman mason. Ayyub's troop was led outside the city gates and across the two drawbridges to the start of the causeway that led from the mainland toward the city. Here a long convoy of ox-carts, loaded with freshly cut quarry stone, waited patiently. These unwieldy and heavy carts exceeded the weight limits of the drawbridges; they could not be allowed in.

"That's today's first job!" the mason announced smugly. "Offload the quarry stones from those wagons and load them onto the barges down there." He pointed to four barges tied up in the moat. While it made sense to transport the heavy stones by barge to the seaward side of the city where the work was to begin, the task of carrying the massive stones down the steep slope of the moat to the barges was daunting. It didn't help that a stiff southerly breeze had whipped up the surface of the moat, making the barges bob and sway. The mason warned, "And watch what you're doing. Any cracked or chipped

blocks will be deducted from your pay."

Ayyub thought that far worse than paying for cracked or chipped stone was the prospect of a broken foot or fingers. A man could be crippled for life if he mishandled stones like these. But a fellow laborer was more concerned about compensation and shouted out, "Just what *are* you paying?"

"Should have asked that earlier," the mason answered with a shrug.

"I'm asking now," the workman answered, crossing his arms over his chest in a defiant stance.

Ayyub frowned. He didn't want a troublemaker on his team. Employers didn't always distinguish between individuals and might just fire the whole team. To express his opinion of the other man's obstinacy, he started in the direction of the cart.

"There are plenty of men willing to work, if you fancy yourself too good for it," the mason articulated Ayyub's gesture.

"I didn't say that; I just asked what the wages are," the first man prevaricated, uncrossing his arms and taking a more cooperative stance.

"Two dinars a day," the mason answered.

"With or without lunch?" a third man asked. By the looks of him, he hadn't had a square meal in several weeks and probably would have worked for the meal alone.

"Lunch is included," the mason answered, and that clearly satisfied the man who had asked about lunch, but not the man who had asked about wages. Although he joined the others at the cart and started to lend a hand, he grumbled. "Slave wages, that's what they're paying, the fat bastards! Slave wages!"

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about!" Ayyub snapped at him bitterly.

"The hell I don't!" the troublemaker bristled. "I've worked construction sites from Paris to Marseilles, and the going rate is two and half! The Archbishop of Sens was paying *three* for the work on his cathedral."

"And I've worked construction sites from Aleppo to Cairo, and *slave* wages are f***ing zero—nothing—shit, spit, and kicks in the ass!" Ayyub snarled bitterly.

The others looked at him with varying degrees of sympathy. The troublemaker just looked baffled. "Huh?"

"Stop jawboning and get to work!" The mason put an end to the exchange, and they all put their backs into it.

It was hard work. They took turns standing on the bed of the cart and lowering a stone onto the back of a comrade, who then staggered down the steep slope to two men aboard the barge. There, one took the stone from the man carrying it and handed it off to the last man, who stacked it on the barge to keep the weight as evenly distributed as possible.

By terce they felt as if their backs were nearly broken, and all had stripped down to loincloths as they worked in the fierce summer heat. There was still a cart waiting to be unloaded when a wagon arrived laden with water, a cauldron of steaming stew, and loaves of bread. The construction team quit work, too hungry to obey the mason's orders to finish offloading the last cart first.

Ayyub grasped for water first and helped himself to two ladles full, pouring it down his parched throat so fast that some of it spilled down the side of his chin. It was lukewarm and tasted stale, but he hardly minded. He then grabbed a loaf of bread and tore several chunks off with his teeth. He'd had nothing to eat since yesterday noon, and had been having dizzy spells in the noonday heat by the time the food arrived. Only after he'd gobbled down half the loaf did he line up for the stew, which smelled strongly of onions and looked greasy. Ayyub wasn't fussy. He took the bowl offered and started soaking up the soup with what was left of his bread.

With two dinars, he calculated mentally, he'd be able to afford a bath, a shave, and a decent meal tonight. Furthermore, if he'd been hired for the whole job, not just the day, he had the prospect of earning two dinars per day, or sixty dinars a month, for the next six, eight, maybe even twelve months. Maybe he could start to look for real lodgings, rather than sleeping under an improvised shelter in an alley. It wasn't that bad now, in the height of summer, but he knew that when the rains and cold set in this fall, sleeping under a leaking roof would be miserable. He didn't want to have to do that again.

"Get up! Get up!" the mason started yelling at them. "The master's coming! Get back to work!" The journeyman sounded rather frightened, Ayyub thought, but he was no more willing than the others to drop his meal just to make their young overseer look good to his master.

Unable to motivate the workers, the journeyman mason ran forward to meet the master builder with a flood of excuses. The master builder, still flanked by his clerk, frowned, but did not voice any audible reproaches. Instead he ordered (in a sarcastic voice), "When you *do* get finished, bring your team back to the quay."

"Yes, sir!" the young mason promised. "We'll be there in an hour, sir! You can rely on me, sir!"

The master builder ignored his subordinate and turned his horse around to return into the city. He found the drawbridge blocked by a party of horsemen riding out of the city. These men wore armor and surcoats, and longswords hung at their hips, spurs glinting on heels: knights.

"Aren't those the crosses of Ibelin?" one of Ayyub's companions asked, pointing to the trapper of the nearest horse. "It must be Balian d'Ibelin! I heard he was passing through on his way back from Sidon to Acre."

"No, the rider's too young," one of the others retorted.

Ayyub eagerly turned his attention to the party of knights. He'd been born and raised in Nablus, a city held by the Dowager Queen of Jerusalem. He could still vividly remember the siege of Nablus in 1184, when all the citizens had to take refuge in the citadel while Saladin's troops sacked the town. The citadel had been awash in frightened humanity, and it was soon obvious that there weren't enough supplies to feed so many people for more than a day or two. But the Baron of Ibelin had ridden through the night to their relief, and Saladin's men had fled before him. Ayyub would never forget the moment when the frantic howling of horns announced the baron's approach and he'd scrambled to the top of a stairway to get a better look.

Now, a decade later, he could still recognize Ibelin from his memory of that day. Pointing excitedly, he declared, "Beyond the youth, on the chestnut! *That's* the Baron of Ibelin!"

The master builder, too, had recognized the leader of the party blocking his way, and bowed deeply from the waist. Ibelin's voice, speaking Arabic, carried on the breeze to the curious workers.

"… on Cyprus . . . aqueducts and drains . . . recommend . . . "

The master builder was shaking his head vigorously, but because he faced the opposite direction they could not catch his words.

Ibelin spoke again, but he leaned forward on his pommel to speak more personally with the builder and lowered his voice. None of the workers could hear what he said, but they saw the master builder respond by shaking his head and gesturing vaguely.

Ibelin nodded, sat upright again, and signaled his men to turn around. Ayyub got a look at his face: he looked discouraged, Ayyub thought.

The distraction over, the journeyman turned his attention back to his charges and complained, "What are you gawking at? We need to unload the last cart."

"What did my lord of Ibelin want?" Ayyub asked, as he brushed the

last crumbs of bread from his hands and stood up to show his readiness to get back to work.

"Oh, he's looking for a master builder willing to go with him to Cyprus. He says there are major building projects that need to be undertaken, but no skilled labor on the island. He'd heard about the master from someone and came here to try to recruit him, but the master's got more than enough work here." The journeyman was proud of the fact. "Come on! We need to get this job done."

Ayyub dutifully left his chipped bowl back on the stack beside the cauldron, and climbed aboard the last wagon to get the process started again. All the while, his mind was racing. Major building projects. He'd heard the words "aqueducts" and "drains." Those were things that took *real* skills: mathematics, geometry, proper plans, and detailed, properly scaled sketches. Not that this project didn't, but he was as far away from the plans as the earth was from heaven. But once upon a time, when he'd been apprenticed almost a decade ago, he had dreamed of building aqueducts. That was why he'd asked his father to get him a contract with Moses ibn Sa'id. Master Moses was the man who'd built the third aqueduct at Caesarea. He'd come to Nablus to carry out construction of an even more ambitious aqueduct project. They'd only just started work on the aqueduct when Saladin invaded. The army had been called up, and Moses ibn Sa'id had followed the call, joining the feudal host armed with a spiked mace. As a man who'd learned his trade from the ground up and was adept with chisel and hammer, Master Moses was a formidable fighter. But the catastrophe of Hattin had swallowed both of them.

Ayyub found himself in Nablus when it was overrun by the Saracens just two weeks after Hattin. He'd made the mistake of not fleeing to Jerusalem when the Dowager Queen left with her household, foolishly thinking he'd be fine and still hoping that Master Moses would miraculously turn up. Instead, Ayyub had been picked up in a Saracen dragnet, and despite his fluent command of Arabic and his ambivalent name, was identified as Christian by his inability to produce the right answers about the Koran. Clamped into chains, he'd been sent back to the slave market in Damascus and a nightmare that lasted five years. Slavery had shattered not only the world he had known, but his future as well. When he was finally released by the Treaty of Ramla, he was nineteen years old and trained in nothing but how to endure humiliation, starvation rations, blows, flogging, and endless labor. In five years, Ayyub swore, he had never had a kind word, a gesture of sympathy, or a day of rest.

The cart was empty at last, and the journeyman released the barges to their respective crews and led his troop of laborers back through

the city to the inside quay. Here they found that two cranes had been assembled and mortar was being mixed. As the barges came alongside the outside of the quay, the stones had to be offloaded again and lined up ready for use. Having worked all morning on the eastern edge of the city in the full heat of the rising sun, they now had the pleasure of working on the western edge of the city as the sun sank. The temperature had risen steadily throughout the day, but the breeze had died down. As they worked, the sun glinting off the water was almost blinding, and the heat stewed them in their own sweat.

The ringing of vespers marked the end of the twelve-hour day at last, and the men dropped whatever they were doing and lined up for their pay. The clerk, protected by two burly sergeants, placed himself behind a crude table, and each man made a mark beside his name on a scroll to confirm receipt.

Ayyub nodded his thanks to the clerk as he took the two dinars, and stashed them inside a purse tied to a cord *inside* his kaftan. He then hastened around the corner and up the street to a small square with a public fountain. Here he removed his kaftan again, knelt with one knee on the rim, and reached as deeply as he could into the basin to wash his arms. Then he cupped water so he could wash his face, and poured it with his hands over his head and splashed at the back of his neck. Finally, he splashed his upper body and armpits liberally with water to remove the worst of the sweat and grime. As clean as he could get himself in this manner, he pulled his kaftan back over his head, combed out his wet hair, and retied it behind his head.

Feeling somewhat restored, although sore all over, he started up the street to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. He had a plan, but it all depended on Master Moses.

His former master had suffered even more than he had himself. Taken captive on the field of Hattin, his very prowess with the mace had attracted the attention of his enemy. He had killed one man too many, or maybe just the wrong man. In any case, his captors were so full of rage that, once they had disarmed him, they made him lie face down on the bloody field and hacked off his right hand halfway to the elbow. A cripple, he had gone into captivity, and there found himself the property of a bathhouse owner, who used the former master builder to clean out the latrines.

On his release after the Treaty of Ramla, Master Moses—like thousands of other former slaves—had washed up in Tyre. In a city overrun with released captives, he was nothing special, just another ex-slave—and a crippled one at that. No one cared what he'd been before Hattin, and a man of forty-something with just one hand could not compete with hordes of healthier, younger men like Ayyub

himself. He had ended up a beggar, and it was in this capacity that Ayyub and Moses had met again roughly a year earlier.

Since then Ayyub had made a point of sharing some of his earnings whenever he was lucky. That was rare enough, and Master Moses was visibly failing. He was permanently bent, skeletally thin, and increasingly mentally absent as well. Ayyub was terrified the former master might be too far gone to help him now.

At least he was sitting in his usual spot, nestled into one of the niches formed by the receding arches of the main portal. He had a dirty rag spread out before him for people to drop coins into as they entered or departed. His unkempt mane of graying hair hung about his shoulders, but it had thinned so much that his scabby scalp showed through in many places. His wrinkled face was dirty and blank. He sat with his knees bent before him and his stump propped on them for all to see: a silent plea for alms.

"Master Moses!" Ayyub called as he reached the foot of the stairs up to the portal and started up them.

His former master's head swung slowly and stared at Ayyub as he approached. He did not smile in pleasure; he just stared.

"Master Moses." Ayyub went down on his heels in front of the beggar. "What would you say to working as a master builder again? To building aqueducts?"

"I'd say you've gone mad," came the bitter answer.

"But could you do it? Could you design and build an aqueduct? Like we were going to do together?"

"Have you been drinking or chewing khat?" the master builder asked, narrowing his eyes and eyeing Ayyub suspiciously.

"Neither! I can't afford such luxuries. The Baron of Ibelin is looking for a master builder to build aqueducts and sewage drains on Cyprus."

"I've seen more *sewage* drains than I ever want to see the rest of my life!" the ex-slave growled. "Go away!"

"This isn't about cleaning them out," Ayyub protested frantically, his dreams collapsing around his ears. "It's about designing them and watching other people build them."

The beggar snorted skeptically and snarled, "What's in it for you?"

"Just that you take me on as your apprentice, like before: that you take me with you."

"Where?"

"To Cyprus! Didn't I already say that? Ibelin wants a master builder willing to go with him to Cyprus."

"That's what *you* say!" Moses scoffed. "Sounds like a drunkard's

dream to me."

"I'm not drunk. I'm stone-cold sober, and I heard the exchange myself. What's the harm in trying?"

"Trying what?"

"Going to find the Baron of Ibelin and presenting yourself."

Moses ibn Sa'id made a rude noise.

"Come with me!" Ayyub insisted, reaching out to pull Moses to his feet by his forearm.

Moses tried to shake him off, but Ayyub was stronger. "You're coming with me," Ayyub insisted.

Moses was too weak to effectively resist, and so he found himself being dragged through the streets to a small and rather disreputable bathhouse run by a fellow Syrian Christian. Ayyub handed the bathhouse owner twelve obols and pulled Moses inside with him. The bath boy made a face at the sight and stink of the beggar, but his employer cuffed him and told him to get to work. The two guests stripped out of their filthy rags, and each lay face down on a bench. At once they began to soak in a sense of luxury and relaxation as their bodies sweated away the accumulated filth of weeks (or months, in Moses' case). They were washed down by the attendant, lathered in soap, washed again, oiled, and washed a third time.

Ayyub's stomach was growling long before they were finished, and it cost him considerable discipline to pay for a barber, gutting his food money, but the transformation in Moses was significant. Except for their clothes, they both looked quite respectable by the time they showed up at the Archbishop's palace and requested an audience with the Baron of Ibelin.

"Beggars go to the back. You can get leftovers from the kitchen there," the Turcopole guard dismissed them.

"That's a good idea," Moses agreed, turning away at once. Ayyub stopped him. "First we talk to the baron," he told his companion.

"Didn't you hear the young man? He's not going to see us."

"Yes, he will," Ayyub insisted, turning back to the Turcopole. "Sir," he addressed the Turcopole, "listen to us. We're not here to beg. We're here to offer our services to the Baron of Ibelin."

"Don't make me laugh," the Turcopole answered. "Move along."

"Not until you've at least sent word to the Baron of Ibelin that the master builder who built the aqueduct at Caesarea, the man who was building the aqueduct at Nablus, is here requesting an audience."

The Turcopole narrowed his eyes and looked from Ayyub to Moses and back again. "If this is a hoax, I'll have you both in the stocks for a

week," he threatened.

"And we'd deserve it," Ayyub answered steadily, meeting his eye, "but I'm not lying. The Baron of Ibelin is looking for my friend. He'll be angry if he finds out we were here and you turned us away."

"How would he find out?" the Turcopole countered, and for a moment Ayyub feared he was going to send them away after all. After a moment of letting them dangle in doubt, however, he pointed to a stone bench built beside the gate and told them to wait there. He turned around and shouted to a colleague to man the gate while he took a message to Ibelin.

It seemed to take forever, and Moses was grumbling about having wasted money on baths that they could have spent on food. "We can beg for food at the Archbishop's kitchen," Ayyub retorted.

"Sure, and all we'll get is *slops*. You think I don't know? I've filled my belly there more times than I can count. They feed *pigs* better than what he gives us."

"Hey!" It was the Turcopole guard. "Come with me!"

They jumped up and hurried to follow him. *Now* Ayyub was nervous. Up to this moment, he'd been so sure he'd fail to get an audience that he hadn't envisaged actually *facing* the Baron of Ibelin. As the Turcopole led them across the courtyard, up a flight of stairs, and down a corridor, Ayyub frantically tried to think what he should say, but everything sounded stupid in his own ears. They found themselves in a small chapel, apparently used for private prayer, and were told to wait. Ayyub took the opportunity to address the icon of the Virgin and Christ Child over the altar in a desperate plea for divine assistance.

Suddenly a lady swept into the little chapel with a smile on her face, only to come to an abrupt halt as her eyes lit upon the two men in front of her. Ayyub went down on one knee and bowed his head with a respectful, "My lady." He recognized the Dowager Queen of Jerusalem. Moses, however, seemed to have turned to stone, and he just stared at his former patroness.

The Dowager Queen glanced from Moses to Ayyub and back to Moses. "Master Moses?" she asked uncertainly in French.

Although Ayyub did not speak French, it was obvious to him that she did not recognize the former master builder, shrunken and broken as he was, so he hastened to explain in a flood of Arabic. "Yes, my lady! It's Master Moses ibn Sa'id, the master builder you commissioned to build the aqueduct at Nablus, and I'm Ayyub ibn Adam. I was his apprentice for two years before Hattin landed us both in slavery."

The Dowager Queen looked rather strangely at Ayyub and shook her head to convey that she could not understand him. Then she turned again to Moses and repeated "Master Moses?" followed by something else that made Moses look down at his stump and shrug. After a moment he answered with a single word: "Hattin."

"But there's nothing wrong with his brain!" Ayyub pointed out frantically in Arabic, certain that the Dowager Queen was dismissing Moses as a cripple. Mentally, he asked God why the Lady of Ibelin had come rather than her husband. At least the Lord of Ibelin spoke fluent Arabic. . . .

The Dowager Queen silenced him with a raised hand, but then gestured for him to wait. She withdrew. At least they hadn't been thrown out.

After another long stretch of time, the Baron of Ibelin ducked through the doorway. He had removed his armor and was dressed in a cotton surcoat over leather trousers and a silk shirt. Although he looked comfortable and prosperous, up close Ayyub registered that he, too, had aged significantly since that day a decade ago. He had a streak of gray in his silky, dark hair, and the network of lines around his eyes was deep, the shadows dark. The eyes themselves, however, were alert and took in the two men awaiting for him. He seemed to assess them both before he addressed Master Moses in French.

The latter nodded, and looked down hopelessly and glumly at his stump.

Again Ayyub protested in Arabic. "It doesn't matter about his arm! He doesn't need it to direct others. The Saracens didn't take away what he *knows*. He can still *design* aqueducts, and I can be his draftsman. All he has to do is tell me, and I'll make the drawings. I can . . . " His voice faded away under the baron's steady gaze.

"And who are you?" Ibelin asked into the silence.

To Ayyub's amazement, it was Master Moses who answered for him before he could take a breath. "He is my apprentice, or he was once. He's a good boy, my lord. Ayyub ibn Adam."

"And is he right?" the baron asked. "Can you still design buildings and teach Ayyub how to do the drawings? The surveying?"

"Yes—yes, I think I can." Moses sounded uncharacteristically uncertain and added apologetically, "It's been a long time."

"Of course he can," Ayyub insisted, pleading desperately with his eyes.

"And you are prepared to come to Cyprus?" Ibelin asked.

"Of course! Gladly!" Ayyub assured him emphatically. Anything to get away from the poverty here, to have a new start.

Ibelin looked pointedly at Master Moses, and the old man nodded hesitantly.

"The population on Cyprus is more homogeneous than here," Ibelin warned. "They all speak Greek and dress in the Byzantine fashion. You will want to adapt as fast as possible. I fear they will look on you as Muslims because of your names, speech, and dress."

"I'll wear anything you give me—or tell me to," Ayyub corrected himself hastily. Learning another language was more intimidating, but he dared not express any doubts.

Ibelin nodded again. "I'm willing to see what you can do. Do you have families you wish to bring with you?"

Ayyub and Moses shook their heads.

"It's probably better that way. If you marry on Cyprus, it will help you assimilate more rapidly." He smiled at that, and then told them matter-of-factly, "I'll send my squire to show you where to get a meal and where to sleep tonight. We leave for Acre first thing in the morning, so I'll have Georgios organize a couple of hired hacks for you as well." He nodded one last time and withdrew.

Ayyub and Moses stood staring at one another in stunned disbelief, and then Ayyub flung his arms around his still-bewildered former master in speechless relief. He didn't care what awaited him on Cyprus: it was a new beginning.

Royal Palace at Acre, August 1195

"I'm sorry to see you go," Champagne admitted to his father-in-law somewhat awkwardly. "And Isabella misses her mother very much. She was very upset that she wasn't here for Alice's birth."

Ibelin nodded but countered, "Isabella *likes* having her mother with her, but she doesn't *need* her; she's strong and attended by the best physicians in the Kingdom. My niece Eschiva, on the other hand, nearly died at the last birth," he exaggerated. From Balian's perspective, Isabella had been spoiled much of her life and, now that she was a ruling queen with a doting husband, she was on the brink of becoming insufferable. Isabella truly did not need her mother waiting on her. Eschiva, on the other hand, was emotionally fragile and intensely grateful for Maria Zoë's moral support.

"I suppose you're right," Champagne admitted reluctantly, "but I miss your sage voice in my council as well." He flashed Ibelin a smile that was intended to be winning.

It very nearly was. Ibelin was not immune to flattery. Part of him felt he *ought* to remain in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and play his hereditary role in the High Court. Furthermore, here he was recognized as the premier baron in the realm by virtue of being stepfather to the Queen. If Champagne recognized him as an asset, it increased his value to the Kingdom. Didn't he owe it to Jerusalem to give her everything he had? Did it matter if his greatest contribution was no longer the strength of his arms but rather the quality of his advice?

He hesitated, rethinking his decision to return to Cyprus. He had expected to feel more "at home" here, but Caymont still felt alien—while Acre and Tyre, and indeed the entire country, struck him as overpopulated and over-cultivated. The countryside seemed dry and dusty and the cities smelly and crowded, after the forested mountains and well-watered plains of Cyprus. The sun seemed hotter here, too, because Cyprus was cooled by strong winds, and the castles sat a thousand feet or more above sea level.

Shifting uncomfortably in his chair, he recognized that after nearly a year away, he'd also been discomfited by the large number of Arab caravans that used Acre and Tyre as their market for West-bound goods. They were a constant reminder of the defeat the Christians had suffered and the threat that remained. On Cyprus, on the other hand, it was so easy to forget about Hattin. . . .

And there was Paphos. Aimery had offered it to him. "Rebuild it, and it's yours," he'd said plainly. The offer was more than tempting: it was seductive. On the one hand, the city's Roman/Greek heritage was so dominant that it was almost like returning to the age of Christ. On the other hand, it was in such a state of decay and disrepair that it begged for help. The vision of a new city with a modern castle and a Latin cathedral was far more compelling that Champagne's offer of a seat on his council. Ibelin took a deep breath. "Thank you. I'm honored, but no. I promised Aimery I would return."

"Aimery." Champagne's face turned sour and his voice tart.

That surprised Ibelin. Champagne had been in the wrong with his accusations of treason against Aimery, and the Lusignan's gracious withdrawal to Cyprus had saved them all an unpleasant confrontation. Champagne, Ibelin thought, ought to be grateful to Aimery. "Surely you can have nothing against him now?" Ibelin asked with an edge of exasperation in his voice.

"Is it true he is trying to have himself made king?" Champagne returned sharply.

Ibelin registered Champagne's resentment and tried to reply in a mollifying tone. "He needs the authority of a crown to keep the likes

of my nephew, Cheneché, and Barlais in check. By offering Cyprus to the Holy Roman Emperor in exchange for a crown, he also gains an ally against the Greek Emperor, who still claims Cyprus."

"In case you've forgotten, the snake calling himself Holy Roman Emperor is the man who held my uncle Richard in a dungeon!" Champagne retorted hotly. "He treated the King of England—a *crusader*—as if he were a *criminal*! The Hohenstaufen is a madman!"

"I wouldn't know. I haven't met him," Ibelin demurred, "but he *is* a very powerful monarch. Furthermore, he's taken the cross and is recruiting a substantial force to come to your aid. The truce with the Saracens, don't forget, runs out in nine months."

"No, I haven't forgotten," Champagne answered grimly. "It's one of the things that keeps me awake at night—and, indeed, *another* reason I wanted you to stay. I wanted to consult with you about our strategy. When the Holy Roman Emperor comes, I don't want all his men wasted on a futile assault on Jerusalem. Twice the French forced my uncle to waste men and horses on a goal that was never achievable. Even if we could capture it, Jerusalem cannot be held now any more than it could have been held three years ago. When reinforcements arrive from the West, we need to direct them toward a goal that is strategically sound and will strengthen this kingdom in the long run."

Ibelin nodded, relieved that Champagne had learned this lesson from the Lionheart. "I couldn't have said it better myself," he told his young king.

Champagne looked pleased by this reply, and Ibelin was both flattered and unsettled. It was flattering that Champagne valued his opinion, but not good for a king to be so obviously unsure about his own military instincts.

Champagne continued, "So, Ascalon? I know how reluctant my uncle was to withdraw from Ascalon—not to mention the effort he put into rebuilding it."

Ibelin's heart missed a beat. To retake Ascalon, they would have to recapture Ibelin first. For a second the image of Ibelin hovered in his consciousness, calling to him like the sirens of the Odyssey. Then Ibelin shook his head sharply to banish it to Hades. "No. Ascalon, like Jerusalem, is far too vulnerable. Your uncle, however, was planning an assault to retake Beirut when Saladin's attack on Jaffa diverted him. Re-establishing control of the coast from here to the County of Tripoli ought to be your priority. It will greatly strengthen all three remaining Christian states if we eliminate the Saracen enclaves separating us."

Champagne nodded and admitted, "Yes, that makes sense. I'll see what the others say."

Ibelin nodded and got to his feet. “Then with your leave, I’ll go find my wife and say goodbye to Isabella.”

Champagne stood and they embraced briefly.

“Go with God,” Champagne ended the audience, and Ibelin bowed deeply. He liked Champagne, but as he exited the chamber he still felt a sense of relief and excitement to be returning to Cyprus.

Chapter Eighteen
Pirates of the Mediterranean

Paradisi, Cyprus, November 1195

THE PLACE WAS WELL NAMED, ESCHIVA thought. There was surely no place on earth more like paradise than this manor, nestled between low hills encircling a small cove on the south shore of Cyprus. There was a beach of fine white sand between arms of white limestone, and water so clear it was like glass the color of aquamarines. Even when the wind blew, it remained transparent, yet transported the gently wiggling beams of light to the minnow-rich floor of the cove. The meadows behind the beach were a brilliant green after the first rains of autumn. They sprouted tiny yellow and white wildflowers. The orange trees on the slopes were heavy with ripening fruit and harbored hosts of songbirds. The hills formed a natural protective wall around the small complex of whitewashed stone buildings, giving Eschiva a sense of utter security and privacy.

Beyond the hills, people labored, traveled, traded, and tilled the soil. Beyond these natural walls, they quarreled, competed, and complained. Out there, Aimery was still struggling to establish his control over this unruly island, and she was expected to be his consort. But here she had no duties and no one expected anything of her. Instead, she lived in simple peace and harmony with her little brood of children. Except for Guy, who was with Aimery, they were all with her, including the latest addition to her growing brood: Hugh. He'd been born in October, a perfect little Lusignan with hair so fair it was almost invisible and bright blue eyes. He was sure to seduce all the ladies of his brother's court when he grew up, Eschiva thought, just as his father had.

Hugh was not objectively more perfect than any of his older siblings, of course. Eschiva recognized that. Yet after the nightmare of last year's miscarriage, bringing Hugh into the world healthy and whole had seemed miraculous. As if by divine intent, he'd also made things easy for her, coming a little early but with little fuss, and from the start he'd been sweet-tempered. He slept well, fed well, and smiled

more than any infant she could remember. With Hugh in her arms, Eschiva felt utterly content and complete.

He would be her last child, she had resolved privately, feeling that three sons and two daughters was enough. Maria Zoë had confided in her that there were safe ways of preventing a new conception without even telling Aimery about it, and Eschiva was resolved to take her advice as soon as she'd recovered enough strength to return to Nicosia and take up her duties.

The need for her to do both—get well *and* take up her duties—was evident to everyone. For all Aimery's concern for her health, he was also impatient for her to take a more active role in his realm now that a tentative peace had been established. A lady dispensing charity and showing an interest in the cultural and social life of the island would do much to bolster his fragile popularity. It was also more appropriate for a lady to be reconciliatory and forgiving than for the lord himself. A lord needed to be feared and respected; a lady to be loved and cherished. Aimery argued persuasively that the time had come when a gentler face would win them more support than his sword, and he wanted her to be that face.

But there was also no question that Eschiva was too weak to take up her duties just yet. She tired just from walking from one end of the palace in Nicosia to another. She had frequent dizzy spells, and her skin was so pale and bloodless it was like ivory. The apothecary Andreas Katzouroubis prescribed complete rest and a diet rich in seafood, particularly mussels and clams, and cheese. He also suggested she eat as many oranges as possible and cook with lemon juice.

Eschiva was determined to follow the doctor's orders, and Paradisi was surely the perfect place to do so. Not only was it surrounded by orange groves, while bountiful lemon trees filled a walled garden, but local fishermen brought their catch to the cove daily. The local women brought their fresh cheese as well, along with olives soaked in their own oil. Eschiva had convinced herself she was feeling better already, although she'd only been here a fortnight.

"Mama! Mama!" six-year-old Aimery called excitedly from the beach. "Come see! Come see!" His high-pitched voice was frail and distant, partially carried away by the light but freshening breeze.

Eschiva was sitting under a roof of vine leaves woven through a framework of bamboo with Hugh in a cradle beside her. She lifted her head to see what had excited her middle son.

"Baby turtles, Mama!" The high-pitched voice of nine-year-old Helvis joined her little brother.

Eschiva could see all three of the older children clustered around something on the beach. Her lethargic body wanted to remain where

she was, but her heart said she should go to the children. When would she ever again have time for them like this? If Aimery succeeded and was given a crown, she would become a queen. She would have endless duties and obligations, not to mention the duty to protect her dignity. She would not be allowed to wade barefoot into the lusciously warm waters of the Mediterranean to look at baby turtles with her children.

She glanced around for the wet nurse, but the young Italian woman, Cecilia, had gone inside to fetch some needlework for them. So Eschiva scooped little Hugh into her arms and started down the sandy trail through the soft grass toward the beach. Before she reached little Aimery and Helvis, however, eleven-year-old Burgundia came running toward her. “Give Hugh to me, Mama!” she demanded, adding, “You know it exhausts you to carry him!”

Eschiva smiled at Burgundia’s concern and handed off the easygoing Hugh, not because she felt exhausted, but because she liked to see her eldest daughter taking such an interest in her infant brother. Aimery was already talking about marriages for Burgundia. Thinking like a king, he was looking for alliances that would serve Cyprus best. He was currently most taken with the thought of forging ties of kinship with Leo of Armenia. Leo had been systematically expanding his territory and his power for several years now, and he had proved effective in holding his frontiers against the Turks as well. Furthermore, he favored independence over close ties to Constantinople. However, he had no sons, so any ties would be indirect, via one of his nephews. Eschiva had asked for more information about these young men, and Aimery had promised to find out what he could. Meanwhile, Aimery had suggested as an alternative that they ask the Holy Roman Emperor to suggest one of his nobles as a means of binding the ever-slippery Hohenstaufen more closely to them. Or there was the Venetian option. As an island kingdom, Cyprus needed maritime ties, and Venice, so Aimery claimed, was on the ascent.

Eschiva had reached the beach, and with a sense of self-indulgence she kicked off her sandals to enjoy the near-visceral pleasure of walking barefoot on the soft, still cool sand. She loved the way her heels sank down and her toes spread out as she rolled forward on first one foot and then the other. Meanwhile Helvis and little Aimery ran toward her, and each took a hand to lead her to the turtles farther down the beach.

Peripherally something caught her attention and, still smiling from mindless contentment, Eschiva turned lazily to see what it was. She was expecting a seagull, a dolphin, or at most a fisherman with his

catch to sell. To her astonishment, she saw the low, sinister prow of a galley oozing its way into the little cove.

In sheer amazement, she stopped dead in her tracks to stare at the ship. The oars were barely moving as it advanced cautiously. No sail was set. No banners flew from the masthead. It was painted black. Just black. Without a trace of trim or heraldry. Even the oars were black.

As if a cloud had crossed the face of the sun, Eschiva felt a shiver run down her spine. Something wasn't right about this galley.

Little Aimery and Helvis had stopped when she did, and their looks followed hers. "What ship is that, Mama?" Helvis asked, frowning.

"Is it a pirate ship?" Little Aimery asked eagerly.

"I don't know," Eschiva answered, adding as a second inexplicable shiver ran down her spine, "I think we should go back to the manor."

"No, no!" Little Aimery protested, tugging at her hand. "Come see baby turtles!"

Eschiva's eyes were still on the ship. Men were pointing at her and she heard shouts in Greek. Men started running about frantically, and the ship pivoted as the starboard oars backwatered. At the stern men appeared to be launching a tender.

"No, Aimery!" Eschiva told her son firmly. "We need to go back to the manor *now*!" She turned around, but little Aimery was still trying to pull her in the opposite direction. Although Helvis and Burgundia scolded him jointly, little Aimery did not take his elder sisters seriously and dug in more determinedly.

"Burgundia, hurry back with Hugh!" Eschiva ordered her eldest daughter, as the sense of danger grew greater with each heartbeat. The tender had plunged into the water with a splash, and half a dozen men jumped overboard from the galley to clamber up into it from the water. Yet the very threat that emanated from the strange ship made Burgundia cling to her side.

Eschiva reached her sandals and bent to pull them onto her feet. Behind her the sound of oars striking the water came nearer and nearer. She glanced in the direction of the approaching tender. There were four men pulling at the oars, their backs to her, and two other men in the boat. They had thick black beards over naked torsos. The hilts of multiple knives and swords lined their belts. Little Aimery in his innocence was right: they must surely be pirates.

Eschiva kicked her sandals aside and tried to run barefoot across the field to the manor, but little stones and crabgrass hobbled her. Despite the rising panic, her feet were too tender, and her strength was giving out. "Run, children! Run!" she screamed. Behind her the keel

crunched on the sand of the beach. Soft thuds told her men had jumped onto the sand.

Only Helvis obeyed. Little Aimery turned around to see what was happening and froze at the sight of the men running toward him; Burgundia clutched Hugh in her arms and started whimpering.

The next thing Eschiva knew, she'd been grabbed from behind by a powerful arm around her waist. The stench of the man, as much as the brutality of his grip, made her feel faint. Her legs gave way under her, and she felt them flying through the air as the man spun about and started back to the boat with her. She tried to scream, but his grip was choking the wind from her. Her cries came out in short gasps in rhythm with his strides.

Burgundia managed to get out a bloodcurdling scream before they silenced her somehow, and little Hugh wailed at a pitch to wake the dead. Little Aimery joined in and then Helvis, but Eschiva could see nothing anymore. She was forcefully shoved over the gunnel into the tender. She fell headfirst into the boat, and hit the edge of the seat so hard she was winded. Then her head cracked against the side of the boat, and she felt herself spinning. Still, she struggled to drag herself upright, grasping the side of the boat. A foot kicked her arm, breaking her hold on the side of the boat, and someone clambered into the boat on top of her. She caught a glimpse of a pirate wrenching Hugh away from Burgundia before she was shoved back to the bottom of the boat and held down by the man's naked foot. Eschiva started screaming hysterically as Burgundia was hurled into the boat like a sack of grain, and tiny vibrations indicated the boat was being shoved down the beach. Just as it began to float, a pirate with Hugh in his arms stepped over Eschiva to go to the bow.

The oarsmen took their places and deftly turned the tender back towards the galley. Abruptly the boat tilted sharply to the side. Eschiva screamed, thinking they were about to capsize. Instead, a pirate with her howling son under one arm and dragging Helvis by her hair with the other appeared at the side of the boat. He flung Aimery at his fellows, then dumped a struggling Helvis into the bottom of the boat. One pirate boxed Aimery into silence, while a second stood straddling Helvis with a drawn sword lifted over his head. He shouted at them in Greek.

The side of Helvis' face was torn open with cuts and bruises. Blood oozed out of the side of her mouth and tears streamed down her face. Burgundia was sobbing hysterically as she stretched out her arms to the pirate holding Hugh. "Give him back! Give him back!" she kept pleading frantically.

On the wind behind them came the sound of shouting, and Eschiva

struggled to right herself. The man holding her down with his foot glanced over his shoulder and laughed. Confident of their escape, he took his foot off her chest, and Eschiva dragged herself upright enough to see back to the shore.

Cecilia was standing at the edge of the shore, gesturing wildly, while a half-dozen men rushed onto the beach. Most were bareheaded and without arms or armor. Only one man had a crossbow. He raised it to take aim—but then, shaking his head, lowered it again. He could not risk killing the Lady of Lusignan or one of her children.

With a clunk that sent a shudder through the whole boat, they collided with the galley. The pirate who had captured her shook his naked cutlass in Eschiva's face and pointed for her to climb up netting that had been flung over the galley's side. Eschiva shook her head to indicate she didn't have the strength, but the man grabbed Helvis by the hair again and lifted her clear off the bench to hold her suspended, squirming and sobbing in both terror and pain. With his other hand he held a knife to her throat. "Help me! Help me!" Helvis pleaded.

Eschiva *had* to find the strength to go up the nets. She grabbed them with both hands, and sobbing like her nine-year-old, tried to pull herself up, but she *couldn't*. Then she felt a man's hand shoved between her buttocks, and with brute force he pushed her upwards, as her heart stopped in shame at his intimate grasp. Fortunately, two men leaned down over the railing of the galley and grabbed her under the arms from either side. She was dragged up over the railing and flung onto the deck like a fish. Other pirates were pushing, pulling, or carrying Helvis, Burgundia, little Aimery, and Hugh up the netting.

Eschiva crawled on her knees to pull the terrified Helvis into her arms as the galley started to pivot once again. The tender abandoned, the galley scuttled out of the cove. Clutching Helvis in her arms, the last thing Eschiva saw was the loyal Sir Simon splashing furiously into the water of the cove. He was swinging his sword over his head and shouting insults, curses, and threats. But it was pointless. He couldn't swim in armor, and the galley was surging forward under the power of forty oars.

The pirates locked them in the hold. They were below the water line, and the sound of water rushing past was a constant reminder of the growing distance from home, safety, and civilization. Hugh, usually such a sweet baby, could not be quieted, because he was hungry and his diapers soiled, but Eschiva's breasts were dry and they

had neither food nor clean diapers with them. Little Aimery, after an initial temper tantrum pounding his little fists on the deck, collapsed into a ball of misery and fell asleep. Burgundia kept trying to soothe Hugh, and Eschiva left her to it; as long as Burgundia focused on Hugh, she had less opportunity to think about her own situation. Helvis, lying in her arms, cried herself to sleep.

Eschiva had no sense of where they might be heading, but it was certainly as far away from Cyprus as possible. Nor had she any sense of time, beyond the fact that it was long enough for them all to get very hungry and to be forced to relieve themselves as best they could in a bucket they had found amidst the other nautical supplies.

Eschiva was not naive. She had no illusions about what would soon happen to her, and Burgundia, at eleven, would most likely share her fate. Even Helvis wasn't safe. Not if these pirates were desperate for a female body. As soon as the pirates believed they were safe from pursuit, they would settle down to enjoy their "prizes."

Eschiva tried to remember everything Beatrice had said about the repeated rapes she had endured after her capture. The problem was that Beatrice had not *talked* about it. Not really. She had only, very occasionally, made oblique references with phrases like, "One can learn to endure anything." Or, when someone complained too thoughtlessly, she might remark tartly, "Things could be worse." Still, Beatrice *had* survived with her sanity intact. She had survived long enough to be freed, and because of that, she had been restored to dignity and even authority.

Anne, on the other hand, had not. She had returned from captivity a stunted human, a girl so terrified of the world around her that she literally could not function in it and had retreated to the cell of a convent. She had been transformed from a happy child into a girl who abhorred her very essence, all because she'd been circumcised and then raped by a man she detested at the age of eleven. Burgundia's age . . .

To make things worse for Eschiva, she recognized that while the Saracens viewed Christian women as despicable objects to use as they pleased, they were nevertheless marketable commodities that could be sold to the next man when they tired of them. The pirates might not have that option, which made it far more likely they would simply kill them when they were done with them. By the time the fifty to sixty men aboard were tired of the three females, Eschiva reflected, she and her girls would probably be glad to die. . . .

But what could the pirates possibly want with Hugh? They might raise Aimery to be one of their own. He could serve them like a slave until he either died from the treatment or grew strong enough to fight

back and win their respect. A pirate version of the Mamluke fate. Hugh, however, was too small to be put to work for years to come. He was and would continue to be a perpetual irritation. If they didn't feed and clean him, he would die—so why hadn't they just left him behind? If only they had left Hugh behind . . . If only . . .

Eschiva only realized she had drifted off to sleep when she woke up again. Someone, presumably Burgundia, had dragged a coil of ropes closer and bedded her head upon it. Hugh was whimpering weakly from another coiled hawser, while the three older children had fallen asleep in each other's arms. Although the hold was still warm, the sun no longer burned down on the deck overhead, and the darkness was greater than before. It must be night, Eschiva registered.

She lifted her head and tried to look around the hold, conscious that something had woken her. She struggled to sit up, clamping her teeth against the pain from the bruises to her ribs. Her neck had a crick in it and her shoulder and hip were throbbing with pain. The bruises on her forehead were swollen and hot to touch. She burned with shame as she remembered the feel of the pirate's hand in her crotch, but that thought reminded her of the worse that was bound to come.

The shock had worn off enough, however, for her to try to think what she could do to save her daughters. She could offer to sleep with all of them—but with sixty men, even three women were too few to go around. She wasn't so beautiful that she would be viewed as a special prize. . . .

Of course, her household knights would have sent word to Aimery, but it would take them a day to reach Nicosia, and by then the sea would have swallowed their tracks, and no one would ever find them again. Not unless their corpses washed up in still-identifiable condition on a shore where people had heard about the kidnapping.

There seemed to be a lot of shouting and running about on the deck overhead, Eschiva registered. That probably meant they were approaching a port or an anchorage. She glanced around the hold, pointlessly looking for a place to hide her children. It was a futile thought, because while she could hide them from sight, the pirates knew their own ship better than anyone. They knew, too, that their prisoners could not escape. No matter how good their hiding place, they would be found eventually. . . .

Oddly for going into port, the sound of water hissing along the side of the ship appeared to be intensifying, and the oars were slapping into the water at a faster rate. They were increasing rather than slowing their speed. Perhaps there was a headland or strait they needed to pass around or through?

Abruptly, with a violent jolt and a loud bang, the galley was flung sideways. The children awoke with cries of fear, and overhead all hell broke loose. Shouts, screams, curses, thuds, and crashes could be heard—followed by the clang of weapons.

Eschiva sat bolt upright and then struggled to get to her feet, only to fall down again. The galley was unsteady, wallowing in the waves.

A crash almost directly overhead was followed by splinters raining down on her, and the children started screaming. Burgundia swept up Hugh and clutched him to her, while Helvis and little Aimery cowered down behind one of the coils of rope. Eschiva stepped out of the shower of splinters so she could look upwards. An ax tip pierced the deck, was withdrawn, and then appeared again more fully. It took another half-dozen blows before one of the planks gave way enough to be kicked in. Immediately the ax blows were directed at the adjacent planks until a hole large enough for a man was smashed open. A moment later, a man with an ax in one hand landed in the hold.

Eschiva had been hoping it would be Aimery or one of his knights, and was bewildered to find herself facing a man in leather armor and an open-faced helmet. Then she recognized Magnussen, and called to him in relief.

Magnussen had been searching the darkness. He spun around at the sound of his name, and crossed the distance to Eschiva with a single stride. “Hurry! We can’t hold them for long.” He had hold of her upper arm.

“The children!” Eschiva countered, pointing.

Magnussen turned, saw them, nodded, and then turned back to Eschiva. “You first! I’ll lift you up to my men standing by the hole in the deck!”

Eschiva didn’t have the strength to argue. She let Magnussen grab her around the hips and lift her up toward the break in the deck overhead. As her head emerged above the level of the planking, two men reached for her and helped drag her free. No sooner had she gained the deck enough to crawl aside than she gasped out, “My children! They’re with me!”

Magnussen’s men were already reaching back into the hole to help Helvis out. Eschiva didn’t have the strength to stand, but her eyes turned to the battle raging across the deck of the galley. In the darkness, it was impossible to tell friend from foe. All she could make out were scores of men fighting furiously with sword, ax, and cutlass. She saw a man gutted, his innards spewing out of his mouth as he doubled over, and she turned her head away, screwing her eyes shut.

Magnussen was beside her again. He grabbed her upper arm and

dragged her to her feet. “We can’t hold them much longer!” he repeated. “Come!”

Eschiva stumbled and tripped as he dragged her to the railing. The *Storm Bird* lay alongside, but about ten feet lower in the water. Eschiva hadn’t realized the freeboard of this galley was so much greater.

“Over the side!” Magnussen ordered.

“I can’t,” Eschiva gasped, clutching the side of the ship. The world was spinning around her as she was overwhelmed by one of her dizzy spells.

Even as she spoke, a dozen men closed around them, pursued by the pirates. Magnussen’s men were fighting—and dying—to keep this small piece of deck in their control. If they hesitated another second, they would all die here—and Eschiva would still be a captive. She recognized that, but she did not have the *strength* to lift her legs over the railing. “The children! Take the children! Leave me!”

“Hugh!” Burgundia thrust her little brother into Magnussen’s astonished arms. “Take Hugh to safety! I’m staying with my mother!”

“Haakon!” It was one of his men calling as he slid on his own blood and went down with a terrible crash. A cutlass slit his throat as he lay at the pirate’s feet.

A bloody hand closed around Helvis’ hair and dragged her backwards. Another pirate grabbed hold of a paralyzed little Aimery.

Magnussen vaulted over the railing to land on the deck of his own ship with Hugh still clutched in the crook of his arm. The next instant Eschiva was yanked away from the railing and flung backward. As her head hit the deck, she lost consciousness.

The news of the kidnapping of the Lady of Lusignan and her children spread like wildfire across Cyprus. It was the only topic of conversation in the markets and the taverns of city and town, and across the island Masses were sung for the safe return of the hostages in churches both humble and grand. No matter what people thought of the Franks in general or Lusignan in particular, there was widespread condemnation of the abduction of a young mother, her infant, and three young children. Expressions of distress, sympathy, condolences, and offers of help almost overwhelmed the palace staff.

Sir Simon had dramatically offered Aimery his sword hilt first and spread out his arms, inviting execution. Instead Aimery had cuffed him and ordered him out of his sight. Cecilia had been questioned

mercilessly about what had happened until she collapsed in misery and had to be put to bed to recover. Beatrice, confronted with memories she preferred to forget, wore an expression both haggard and haunted as she tried to keep the household functioning. Maria Zoë found sleep impossible and felt lamed by her helplessness as she watched both Balian and Aimery rage futilely.

"Who could possibly want to harm Eschiva?" Aimery asked them collectively and rhetorically for the hundredth time. "Who? And why? If it had been pirates—as they all claim," he dismissed his wife's household contemptuously, "why haven't there been any ransom demands? I'd pay anything! Anything at all!" He dropped his grizzled head in his hands and cried out inarticulately to Christ.

Aimery hadn't shaved or combed since the news arrived, and with bloodshot eyes and tangled hair he looked quite wild. He was grayer, too, the news having aged him overnight. The sleepless nights made his voice raw when he roared his frustration at everyone in hearing. Nor he could stay still. Instead, when he wasn't chasing after someone for possible information, he paced about the solar, kicking at the furnishings and pounding his fist randomly on tables, walls, and window sills. His thoughts spun around him viciously. His instinct was to attack, to fight, to kill—but he didn't have a target.

Balian's anger had burned itself out sooner, and he now sat looking worse than at any time since his arrival in Tyre after the surrender of Jerusalem. His eyes were sunken in the sockets of his face, and the skin around his eyes and jowls sagged like an old man's, although he was not yet forty-seven. "Pirates will have wanted to put enough distance between you and them to prevent a rescue attempt. They will then have to send someone back across that distance, possibly by a circuitous route to disguise their whereabouts, with their demands," Balian responded to Aimery's most recent outburst.

"What are you saying?" Aimery demanded, staring at him belligerently, although they had never been as united in their feelings as they were now. Over the years they had disagreed over politics, strategy, and tactics. There had been times when Aimery resented Eschiva's affection for Balian, and times when Balian had blamed Aimery for his treatment of Eschiva. Certainly they had been on opposing sides during the succession crisis after Baldwin V's death and again after Queen Sibylla's death. But their love of Eschiva had always bound them together and forced them to find common ground again and again.

"All I'm saying is that the ransom demands may yet materialize," Balian noted wearily.

"We need to burn out the whole nest of pirates at Famagusta!"

Aimery declared, pounding his fist on the nearest table.

Balian looked up at him with a sour expression, too tired to refrain from pointing out, "I *told* you to do that a year ago! Besides," he added in a more discouraged tone, "the pirates anticipated you and have cleared the harbor. It hasn't been this empty in two years, John tells me."

"Where the hell is Magnussen?" Aimery burst out next. "He's supposed to keep my waters safe!"

This time Balian bit his tongue rather than pointing out that Aimery had given Magnussen no resources with which to build up a fleet. It was obvious that Aimery was in no mood for a discussion of what he might have done wrong, and Balian conceded that there was little point in such debate anyway. There would be time enough for recriminations *after* they learned who was behind this kidnapping, and what they needed to do to set Eschiva and the children free.

Aimery growled, "When I find out who told these bastards where Eschiva was, I'll skin him—or her—alive."

"You've been in the East too long, Aimery," Maria Zoë remarked. "Torture is such an Eastern custom—and one Eschiva abhorred."

The clatter of horses, followed by shouting and pounding, erupted in the street below at the entrance to the palace. Maria Zoë, who was sitting in the window seat, leaned forward to try to see what the commotion was. "It looks like a rider has just arrived, but I can't see who it might be. He's completely hooded. It's raining," she added, as she noticed the way the torchlight glistened on the cobbles of the street.

Aimery immediately headed for the door, declaring more from hope than conviction, "It must be someone with news of Eschiva!"

At the door to the hall, he saw a crowd of people burst in and start moving toward the dais in an excited mob. Philip d'Ibelin, sitting with his brother John and cousin Guy at one of the tables, leapt up and started running toward the solar. He bounded onto the raised dais with a single leap, and seeing Aimery in the doorway, called to him, "My lord! Someone's coming—"

"I'm not blind and deaf!" Aimery answered irritably, his eyes riveted on the man in the rain-darkened cloak coming toward him. The hood still shielded his face, but it was clear from his posture that he carried something under his cloak, something precious by the way he moved. He reached the foot of the dais steps and climbed them with a weary doggedness that spoke of long hours in the saddle. Then he looked up and was close enough for Aimery to see his face.

It was a stranger.

The stranger reached up to push his hood off his head with one hand, revealing long, red-blond hair. His other hand remained hidden under his cloak, the elbow still crooked. “My lord,” he croaked out, in a voice laden with grief and warning of bad news.

Aimery backed up into the solar, a sense of foreboding freezing his face and making his movements lame and clumsy.

The cloaked stranger followed him into the room. He was wearing old-fashioned leather boots bound to the leg with thongs, and something clicked in Aimery’s memory. This was surely one of Magnussen’s men.

“My lord,” the man repeated, going down on one knee and then gently pulling back his cloak to reveal a baby sleeping in the crook of his arm.

“Hugh!” Aimery exclaimed instantly, as Maria Zoë and Balian both sprang to their feet in amazement.

“Yes, my lord. Your son Hugh,” the man declared, holding the infant up to Aimery.

Aimery took the little bundle into his arms and looked down at him with wonder. But then his brows knotted in bewilderment. “But what of his brother? Where is Eschiva? The girls?—”

“My lord, Haakon managed to board the pirate ship with half the crew. He broke into the hold where your lady and the children were being held. The crew held the pirates off long enough for Haakon to get them all on deck, but your lady was too weak to climb over the side. As the pirates overwhelmed the crew, your lady thrust the baby into Haakon’s arms and begged him to save at least the infant. That’s what he did.”

“Where is he?” Aimery demanded, and from his grim expression and tone it was clear that he was not satisfied with this story.

“He’s dead.”

Aimery, Balian, and Maria Zoë all gasped at once, and stared at the messenger.

“The pirates fired crossbows as we pulled away. One went straight through Haakon’s back, killing him instantly. We barely managed to catch Hugh as he fell. Almost all the men who had boarded the galley with Haakon were killed, and we lost six more to the crossbows. The *Storm Bird* was so badly reamed from the collision she nearly sank on the return to port. She’ll never be seaworthy again.” Tears were running down the Norseman’s face as he spoke of the fate of his ship, but they were for his captain and his shipmates, too.

Aimery stared in stunned horror, and Maria Zoë hastened to take the baby out of his arms before he dropped the little bundle in his

state of shock.

"Eschiva and the girls? They're still in the hands of the pirates?" Aimery asked, not wanting to believe it.

"Yes, my lord."

"But . . . " But what?

"It was Kanakes," the Norseman added.

"What? Who?" Aimery shook himself out of his shock.

"Kanakes," the Norseman repeated. "He's quite a famous pirate."

"I know! I put a price on his head!" Aimery answered, irritated. "But why hasn't he sent me ransom demands? What does he intend to do with my wife and children?"

"I don't know, my lord, but he was headed for Antiochia Mikra on the southwest coast of Cilicia when we intercepted him."

"Isaac!" Maria Comnena recognized the ruler of this rebellious enclave of Cilicia immediately.

"Isaac who?" Aimery and Balian asked in unison.

"I forget what he calls himself. He's nothing but a petty warlord, a traitor to the Emperor. I believe he has been meddling in the dispute between Leo of Armenia and Bohemond of Antioch. He was *certainly* allied with Saladin as long as the latter lived. God knows who he's allied with now, but his only interests are his own power and wealth."

"Then he will sue for ransom?" Aimery asked.

Maria Zoë drew a breath and held it, hesitating with her answer. In the end she said, "It's hard to know what someone like that wants. I fear he will seek more than money. That would be too mercenary for him. He sees himself more as a power broker." She paused and then reminded them of the positive: "At least we now know to whom we can direct an embassy."

Aimery swung around and looked Balian in the eye. "Will you go?"

"Of course; I'll leave as soon as possible." As he spoke Balian reached out to raise the Norseman to his feet, remarking to the sailor, "You need rest and food. I'll see that you get both, and then I will ask that Masses be said for the soul of one of the bravest and truest men I have ever had the privilege to meet: Admiral Haakon Magnussen."

Cilicia

After the rescue attempt, the treatment of the Lusignan hostages deteriorated. They were bound hand and foot and watched

continuously. Although given water on demand, they were given no food nor any chance to relieve themselves. This treatment robbed them of any strength and all pride. But what did it matter? The pirates had gloated over the fact that the rescue had been a disaster. As they tied them up, they'd told Eschiva that Magnussen had been killed, and that Hugh had fallen overboard to drown. The news had broken Eschiva's heart, leaving her numb to her own fate.

The sounds of oars being shipped, and feet running back and forth overhead, followed by the thud and shudder of the ship going alongside a quay, dragged Eschiva from her oblivion. She lifted her head to glance at her three terrified children. Although Burgundia was trying to be brave, Helvis and little Aimery were both whimpering again. The children were not too young to realize that their arrival at whatever the destination was would bring them new horrors. Helvis' face was swollen and covered with dried blood from the injuries she had received during the kidnapping. Burgundia's gown was soiled from holding Hugh in his dirty diapers. Eschiva glanced down at her own gown and realized it, too, was torn and filthy.

And Hugh was dead. Drowned.

Voices were shouting down to the hold, and the man guarding them stood with a grunt. A ladder was lowered, and their guard cut the cords binding their wrists and ankles before gesturing with his knife for them to climb the ladder. Aimery was closest, and at the sight of the threatening knife blade he scampered up the ladder with astonishing energy. Helvis followed quickly, but Burgundia looked back toward her mother. "Mama?"

The man with the knife shook it at Burgundia, and she grabbed the ladder and mounted it with evident reluctance, but steadily enough to avoid any more threats. Lastly, the man gestured for Eschiva to go. She tried to stand, but the world started spinning around her. She staggered forward, lost her balance, and crashed down onto the floor of the hold. A sharp pain stabbed up from her hip, and she tasted bile in her throat. Over her head the pirate stood shouting at her, his knife just inches from her face. But just trying to sit upright brought the dizziness back and she grayed out.

The pirate shouted furiously. Eschiva expected to feel cold steel on her throat. Instead, men thudded down beside her and roughly dragged her up the ladder to dump her on the deck of the ship.

The fresh air smelled amazingly good, and started to revive her. Burgundia was beside her, too, her little hand on her shoulder saying, "Mama! Mama! Are you all right?"

Eschiva put her hand over Burgundia's and nodded, but did not speak.

“My mother’s sick!” Burgundia spiritedly told the pirates gathered around them. “She can’t walk.”

Eschiva noted mentally that they didn’t need her upright to rape her. They could do that well enough with her lying right here.

Babbling voices and much commotion, however, ended in an improvised stretcher being brought. To her amazement, Eschiva was carried off the galley on this, with Burgundia close beside her. Eschiva had glimpses of a quay laden with barrels and crates being on- or off-loaded. There were some weathered warehouses crowding the quay, and a tavern filled with gaping people in shoddy clothes. The women wore their hair loose and uncovered (whores), and the men looked like sailors from all the seas on earth.

The stretcher was put on the back of a wagon, and the children were ordered to crawl onto the back beside their mother. From where she lay, Eschiva could see nothing but the side of the wagon, so she squeezed Burgundia’s hand and whispered, “Tell me what you can see.”

“It’s a port,” Burgundia started.

“Can you see minarets?” Eschiva asked, fearing they had been landed in Saracen territory and were headed for a slave market.

“No. There’s a church up on the hill.”

“A church?” Eschiva could hardly believe their good fortune. “What does it look like?”

“It’s made of red brick with a dome, more like a Greek church than one of ours.”

Eschiva nodded in relief and let her eyes roll back in her head as unconsciousness overcame her.

She was woken by Burgundia shaking her shoulder. “Mama! Mama! They want us to get out.”

Sure enough, the wagon had halted and men were crowding around it, peering over the sides. These men were dressed differently from the pirates. They had long-sleeved shirts rather than naked torsos, and some had armor that was fashioned primarily from leather but with chain mail in places where flexibility was particularly important, like the neck and under the arms. The children were ordered off the cart with gestures, and then someone grabbed the handles at the end of Eschiva’s stretcher and pulled them far enough for a second man to get hold of the other end. They carried her a few yards and then set her down again in the grass.

From here Eschiva could see what looked like a poor, rundown farm with a lofty barn, some smelly and muddy pens for pigs (further

evidence they were in Christian-held territory), and a stucco house with a smoking chimney. Two women in brown homespun dresses and linen aprons stood staring at the commotion. After some shouting in their direction, the women came over and took charge of the three Lusignan children, gesturing for them to come into the house. Although the women did not look very bright and were clearly taking orders from the armed men, they were instinctively maternal, and one gently touched Helvis' bruised and scratched face, saying something that sounded comforting.

Eschiva was left lying outside for several more minutes. Eventually she saw a man in long black robes come out of the house. The robes looked like those of an Orthodox monk, but that didn't make sense to Eschiva. Surely no man of God would be involved in kidnapping, rape, and whatever else was going on here? This man handed a purse over to the leading pirate. The pirate chief opened the drawstring and poured the coins into his palm, counting carefully. Satisfied, he nodded, replaced the coins in the purse, and climbed back onto the seat of the wagon. The other pirates clambered onto the back, and the wagon slowly turned around in the little yard. Evidently the pirates had been contracted to conduct this abduction by the men here. That meant the objective was not merely rape and murder, Eschiva reasoned.

After the pirates had departed, the man in the black robes approached Eschiva with long, purposeful strides. He had a full black beard that extended a good four inches from his chin. His black hair was long and wild. His nose was broad, and his eyes were pools of black hatred. Eschiva recognized that, even if his expression was completely at odds with the large wooden cross that hung on his breast. This man was indeed an Orthodox monk, she registered.

He stopped, looked down at her for a long moment, and then spat on her. "Lusignan!" he hissed. "Lusignan's woman and brats!" he spat again, followed by a furious diatribe in Greek. All she could understand was the visceral hatred it expressed.

Another man had come up behind the monk and laid a hand on his shoulder. He said something in Greek and then turned to Eschiva and spoke in heavily accented and poorly constructed French. "My friend Brother Zotikos would rather I kill you and the children, but I have convinced him you're worth more to us alive than dead. We will send your husband your wedding ring to prove we hold you in our power, and we will give him a choice. Either he and his wild dogs depart Cyprus and leave it to us Greeks, or we will kill his children one by one and then kill you, too—but not until we've turned you over to our men to enjoy." He smiled at the thought, evidently anticipating that

Lusignan would sacrifice his family for his throne.

Eschiva looked him in the eye and said with all the strength she could muster, “Your men will find little pleasure in raping a corpse.”

The man frowned and snapped, “We’ll kill you *afterwards*, stupid.”

Eschiva shook her head. “It will be too late. I am already dying.” She closed her eyes, crossed herself, and started reciting the Lord’s Prayer with a sense of peace. She could not know what would happen, but she was certain that Aimery would not abandon their children. As for herself, she had said the truth. She could sense that she was dying. She would surely not live long enough for her fate to be of consequence in the power struggle between her husband and her captors.

Chapter Nineteen
Leo of Armenia

Sis, Cilician Armenia, December 1195

IBELIN SET SAIL FROM KYRENIA IN a Venetian galley and made landfall at Antiochia Mikra before sundown. Here, however, his vessel was denied entry. After being fired upon by crossbowmen in the breakwater tower, the ship put about and headed east. They followed the coastline to the Armenian port of Corycos.†

This much more significant port was guarded far more effectively. It had a magnificent fortress built on the island guarding the entrance, and a second, somewhat smaller, castle on the mainland. In addition, a pier or breakwater that would effectively close the waterway between them to a narrow passage was under construction. But this was a friendly port; they sailed in without obstacle.

No sooner had they docked than an Armenian customs official boarded. The Venetian captain explained that he was not trading, simply bringing passengers. Ibelin's party of six knights included a man with Edessan roots and an Armenian mother, Sir Constantine. Sir Constantine spoke Armenian well and rapidly explained their situation. The customs official immediately agreed to take them to Simon, Baron of Corycos.

Ibelin and his party were welcomed at the Armenian baron's town house, where news of the Lady of Lusignan's kidnapping ignited indignation and anger. Their host and his knights were quick to offer their support, and there was brief talk of an immediate assault on Antiochia Mikra. ("We should have taken that rats' nest long ago!" was the widespread feeling.) In the end, however, the calmer voice of the Lord of Corycos prevailed. Ibelin was promised horses and an escort commanded by the Baron's eldest son, Ravon, to take him to Leo, the ruler of Armenian Cilicia.

After a night's rest, Ibelin, his knights and escort set off for Sis, the Armenian capital, some two hundred miles to the northeast. They covered the distance in just over five days, entering Sis in late

afternoon on the second Sunday in Advent, according to the Armenian calendar.

Sis, located at the foot of the Taurus Mountains, was a fine town with many stone houses behind a strong perimeter wall reinforced by tall, square towers at regular intervals. The domes of the churches dominated the skyline of the lower town, but the castle proudly stood above the town, banners fluttering boastfully from all its towers.

Ravon of Corycos was sufficiently important to gain them immediate and unquestioned access to the fortress. Their horses were taken by attentive grooms, and in a very short period of time a household official appeared. He bowed deeply to Ibelin, welcoming him in excellent French to Cilician Armenia and the residence of its ruler. He offered the hospitality of his lord to Ibelin and his party, indicating that the knights should share in the common meal in the great hall, while offering to take Ibelin to a guest chamber where he could bathe and change before an audience with Leo. Ibelin asked that one squire and Sir Constantine accompany him, a request readily granted.

Ibelin followed the household official up a series of stairs and down corridors to a tower chamber well-appointed with fur rugs, including an entire bear. The other furnishings consisted of elaborately carved chests, tables, and chairs, as well as a large box bed hung with fine curtains. The temperature here at the foot of the Taurus Mountains at this time of year was decidedly chilly, and the steward promised that a fire would be laid immediately. He also promised that a bath and hot water would be brought to the chamber along with refreshments. Adding that he could not know when his lord would grant an audience, he suggested that Ibelin make himself comfortable and partake of the refreshments. Then he withdrew.

Ibelin went to the window and opened the shutters to orient himself. He was confronted by a spectacular view of distant snow-capped mountains, and an extensive brick monastery complex with a large domed church on a nearer hill. The bells of the monastery clanged faintly on the cold air, and, as if they were a signal, the bells of the churches in the city started to ring in their different notes. Ibelin crossed himself and drew back into the room, shuddering from the cold air.

This was the farthest he had ever been from Ibelin in his entire life. The world here seemed stranger to him than Damascus. At least in Damascus he had spoken the language. . . .

He turned back into the room, and his eyes fell on Sir Constantine. The knight was slight and wiry, his strength not visible but, Ibelin knew from experience, dogged. Sir Constantine was somewhat

taciturn by nature, not to say melancholy, a function perhaps of his history. His grandfather had been killed in the skirmish that led to the capture of Joscelyn II of Edessa, and with the fall of Edessa six years later his family had lost their lands. The family fortunes further deteriorated when his father was taken captive alongside Bohemond III of Antioch and Raymond III of Tripoli when Constantine was not yet a year old. He had not seen his father again until he was eight. Constantine himself had fought with Tripoli at Hattin, and had been one of the knights to fight his way off the field with the Count—but like Sir Sebastian, he had sought service with Ibelin following the surrender of Jerusalem. Sir Constantine had no land, no family, and no clear purpose in life.

"Tell me everything you know about Leo of Armenia," Ibelin ordered, stepping down from the window seat in search of warmer air. As the sun set, the chill was becoming greater, and Ibelin could see his breath in this tower chamber.

"He's about your age," Sir Constantine opened. "His father was treacherously murdered when he was only fifteen, and he and his brother had to seek refuge with his mother's kin. Ten years later, the man who had probably instigated the murder, Leo's paternal uncle, was in turn assassinated by his own bodyguard. Leo's older brother, Rupin, was recognized as prince. Rupin was a strong friend of the Franks; he was married to Humphrey de Toron's elder sister Isabella."

That piece of news took Ibelin by surprise. "Is she still alive?"

"I don't think so—or if so, she is in a convent, for she retired there at the same time as her husband went into a monastery."

"I thought he was the ruling prince?" Balian asked, confused.

"He was, but Rupin was lured to Antioch on the pretext of negotiations over the disputed border, and was immediately seized by Bohemond and imprisoned. The Armenians had to secure his ransom at huge cost, including recognizing Antioch's suzerainty over Armenia, and the agreement took years to negotiate. Meanwhile, Leo held the reins of government, and with very few men had to defend his brother's territory from both the Seljuks and the Greeks. Eventually Rupin returned from captivity, but he was a broken man. He retired to a monastery rather than resuming his rule."

"Was that his choice or his brother's?" Ibelin asked sharply.

Sir Constantine shrugged. "I can't be sure. I was not here. But my Armenian relatives always spoke highly of Leo. They did not ever suggest foul play on his part."

Ibelin nodded. "Go on. What happened next?"

"Although Armenia had been humiliated, Antioch was in no

position to exploit the advantage, because it was 1187. With the collapse of the Kingdom of Jerusalem following Hattin, Antioch had to prepare for an onslaught from Saladin. In fact, the situation was so desperate that Antioch and Leo buried their differences, and a marriage between Leo and Bohemond's niece cemented their new alliance. Meanwhile, with the Seljuks striking almost to Sis itself, Leo gathered what forces he could and went to meet them head-on. He won a dramatic and unexpected victory over the Seljuks, driving them back into their own territory. After that he supported the crusade of Friedrich Barbarossa, providing horses, supplies, and medical care for the many wounded. After Saladin abandoned the Templar castle of Baghras, Leo seized it, rebuilt it, and garrisoned it. That, however, provoked outrage from Bohemond of Antioch, who felt the castle belonged to him. Leo invited Bohemond to discuss the dispute at Baghras, and promptly took him, his wife, and his entourage hostage."

"What?" Ibelin gasped in sudden alarm.

Before Sir Constantine could answer, a troop of servants arrived with burning coals, tinder, and logs. Although they had been speaking French, which the servants presumably did not understand, Ibelin and Sir Constantine waited until the fire was devouring the kindling voraciously and the servants had withdrawn before continuing.

"Is Antioch still held?" Ibelin asked as the door clunked shut.

"Last I heard," Sir Constantine replied evenly, "but we have not always been well informed of events here."

"Last you heard, *where* was he being held?"

"Right here, in Sis."

Ibelin stared at Sir Constantine. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier? We may have just walked into a trap!"

"How so?" Sir Constantine answered levelly. "Leo seized Bohemond in revenge for what Bohemond had done to his brother. That is the Armenian way. But he has no quarrel with us. He will treat us with great hospitality. As you see." Sir Constantine indicated the servants now lugging buckets of steaming water and a tub into their chamber.

Ibelin watched warily as the tub was set on a mat before the fireplace and water was emptied into it. Then, with resignation, he beckoned Georgios over to help him undress. Lost in thought, he undressed and stepped into the tub. He supposed that Sir Constantine was correct about the lack of motive for any hostile act, and their reception so far had been exemplary. Still he felt uneasy. Maybe it was just being so far from familiar surroundings—or the increasing sense of chasing a mirage.

The only evidence they had that Eschiva was in Antiochia Mikra

was the statement of a Norse sailor that the ship carrying her had been headed that way when it was intercepted. Who was to say the pirates hadn't changed course thereafter? Then again, the fact that he'd been denied entry to Antiochia Mikra seemed to confirm the hostility of its ruler. Nor had Corycos' men doubted for an instant that the tyrant there was capable of such an act of perfidy as the kidnapping of a young mother and her children.

With a sigh, Ibelin stood up and accepted the towel Georgios held out to him as he stepped out of the tub. While Balian dressed in clean clothes, from his braies to his best silk surcoat, Sir Constantine bathed, followed by Georgios. Meanwhile red wine, flatbread, cucumber yogurt, and bowls of beef, beet, and bulgur stew had arrived. The food was loaded onto the table along with wooden cutlery and local pottery. Ibelin, Sir Constantine, and Georgios gathered around to eat heartily.

They had not finished, however, before a knock interrupted them, and the household official bowed deeply before proclaiming, "My lord would see you now, if it is convenient to you, my lord."

Ibelin nodded and stood. Sir Constantine grabbed one of the flatbreads to eat as he followed behind his lord. They were escorted through a large and crowded hall in which they saw the other knights of their party and nodded greeting, but continued to an audience chamber. Here the walls were covered with bright frescoes of scenes from the Gospels, the saints' heads surrounded by solid gold halos. At the center of the far wall was a raised dais with a carved throne on it, and magnificent carpets covered the floor around it. But the throne was empty, and before Ibelin had fully oriented himself, a man in long silk robes and a heavy velvet cloak trimmed in gold strode toward him with an outstretched hand. "My lord of Ibelin," he opened in French (to Ibelin's relief).

Ibelin went down on one knee and bowed his head. Leo of Armenia, however, grabbed him firmly by the elbow and pulled him up to deliver a kiss on each cheek. "Any member of the House of Ibelin is welcome here. I will never forget how your brother was one of the few men to stand by me when the Sultan Saladin joined forces with that snake Isaac Angelus and tried to crush Armenia!"

Balian staggered physically at these words, but Leo of Armenia was too busy talking to notice. "He fought like a lion—not to say St. George himself! Alas, he was not immortal, and he died of the wounds he had suffered as we pursued the Turks all the way to Sarvandikar. It was a grave loss, and I bitterly regret that he did not live to enjoy the reward I would have given him. Did you not know this?" Leo asked, astonished, as he paused long enough to register his guest's expression

of amazement.

“You are speaking of my brother Baldwin, Baron of Ramla and Mirabel?” Balian asked back, dazed and disbelieving.

“Yes. Didn’t you know he had died?”

“I presumed it, because I have heard nothing from him in the last eight years. But I had no idea where, when, or how. He—he fought with you against Saladin?”

“And Isaac Angelus, that traitorous bastard!”

“When—when, again, did you say he died?” Balian asked, beginning at last to understand the silence that had so puzzled him after Hattin.

“1187. That was the reason I could not send help to Jerusalem. Surely you knew that? I was fighting for our freedom, our very existence, right here—with your brother at my side. He was a wonderful man, a great knight. I gladly called him friend and would have happily made him a baron, with a good Armenian wife.”

“My lord, forgive me. I honestly did not know. When my brother left the Kingdom of Jerusalem, he said he was going to Antioch. We heard that he was received there with great honor. After that, however, we heard no more from him. He seemed to just disappear. We had no idea where he was or why he did not send us word of his doings. It is a great comfort to hear that he died as he would have wanted, fighting for Christ.” But the greatest comfort was to think that he had not abandoned his only child out of indifference or because he had a new wife and a new family. Balian begged God to be allowed to tell Eschiva this news, while the prince of Armenia assured him that he spoke the truth.

When the Armenian finished, Ibelin told him, “If it is as you say and you were my brother’s friend, then the news I bring will cause you distress. I am here on account of his only surviving child, his daughter Eschiva, the Lady of Lusignan.”

It was Leo of Armenia’s turn to look astonished. “Is the Lady of Lusignan not well?”

“The Lady of Lusignan was kidnapped by Kanakes from a coastal manor to which she had retired with her youngest children in order to recover from her last childbirth. A galley in the service of Lusignan intercepted Kanakes’ ship off Antiochia Mikra and managed to rescue the youngest child, but the Lady of Lusignan herself was too weak to make the transfer from one ship to the other. She, her daughters, and the Lord of Lusignan’s middle son were, we believe, landed by Kanakes at Antiochia Mikra. We presume that Kanakes was in the pay of Isaac of Antiochia Mikra.”

“The whoreson!” Leo burst out emphatically. “If it is true, he will

either release them to me or I'll crush him!" He grabbed Ibelin by the arm and assured him earnestly, "I swear to you, I will secure their release. Have no more fear for their safety. I will secure their release—not just for your brother, whom I loved well, nor indeed for the good Lord of Lusignan, whom I respect, but for Christ Himself. This was a *despicable* deed!"

Ibelin liked the sound of that, but what if they were wrong and Eschiva was held by someone else?

Mountains of Cilicia, January 1196

Dying was proving to be much harder than Eschiva had expected. It was now, Eschiva calculated somewhat uncertainly, over a month since their capture. Although she could not stand without feeling dizzy and so remained in bed most of the time, her condition appeared to have stabilized.

Since their arrival at the isolated farmhouse, they had been in the care of the two women. Although the Lusignans and their caretakers had no common language, humanity was a language in itself. The women had taken an instant liking to bright-haired, curious little Aimery, and he was already their darling. He followed them around as they went about their chores, and his laughter rang out like church bells, always lifting Eschiva's heart—until she thought of Hugh.

When she thought of Hugh, she felt the desire to join him wherever he was. But if she died, would they be reunited? *He* had been without sin, but she had many sins on her conscience and no confessor to give her absolution. Besides, whenever she found herself wishing she could hold Hugh in her arms again, she was called back to the present by little Aimery, Helvis, or Burgundia.

The women had been very solicitous of Helvis, cleaning her face gently and with sympathy. They seemed concerned that she might have scars, and had produced ointments that they smeared on the cuts with obvious good intent. Indeed, although they showed boundless indulgence for little Aimery, they were no less kindly and motherly to Helvis and Burgundia.

With Eschiva, admittedly, they were more reserved. It was hard to tell if they were following orders to keep their distance or simply intimidated by what they had been told about her. Whatever the reason, they avoided meeting her eye, and seemed embarrassed in her presence. Nevertheless, they had cleaned all their clothes and provided them water and sponges so they could clean themselves as

well. They brought fresh bread and milk for little Aimery daily, but otherwise the diet consisted of salted or dried meat or fish, lentils, and occasionally dried fruits. At times Eschiva felt she couldn't face this mixture again and refused to eat altogether, but then Burgundia would come and coax her.

"Don't die, Mama!" Burgundia pleaded. "What would we do without you? We need you! Please eat at least a little," she begged. Whereupon Eschiva would dutifully take the flatbread and nibble on it until it was consumed. Then Burgundia would kiss her with a heartfelt "Thank you, Mama!"

Eschiva saw little of the guards keeping them here, and nothing of Brother Zotikos. She supposed everyone was awaiting Aimery's response. She tried to picture it, and depending on her energy level she pictured either him storming ashore to rescue her, or negotiations that dragged on for years. The absence of her wedding ring, however, led to terrible nightmares. She had been only eight when Aimery slipped it on her finger, and as she grew older, the knuckle had grown but not the first section of her left ring finger. They had been forced to cut through the gold and pry it open to remove it from the finger that had worn it for twenty-two years. In her sleep, her subconscious combined the missing ring with her most sinister fear: divorce. Instead of Brother Zotikos and his minions cutting off the ring, it was Aimery himself. More than once she had woken up thrashing in her bed, whimpering for Aimery not to leave her.

Her cries inevitably woke the children, and Burgundia would put her arms around her to calm her. Apparently she called out to Aimery in her sleep, because each time Burgundia assured her, "Papa is coming to free us. I know he is."

To which Eschiva could only reply that yes, she was sure, too—although her nightmares seemed to belie her faith.

Suddenly men were bursting into the room with drawn swords—but they weren't Aimery's men. They wore unfamiliar armor and were speaking Greek. They seemed initially confused, until someone saw her and pointed. His commander stormed over to the bed, his sword still raised. Eschiva stared up at that blade and started to pray.

As suddenly as he had entered, he sheathed his sword and asked in hesitant French, "Ma dame, v*ous êtes Madame de Lusignan*?" ("Are you Madame de Lusignan?)

"*Oui*, *je suis*," (yes, I am) she answered him.

The man looked immensely relieved. "I come to rescue you," he declared in his broken French. But no sooner were the words out of his mouth than he frowned and, looking around, started giving orders angrily. Moments later the two women were brought into the chamber

and roughly flung on their knees. Eschiva protested. “Monsieur, don’t punish them! They were only doing what they were told. They have taken care of us as best they could. They have been kind.”

The commander nodded but continued to berate the women, who looked very frightened.

Eventually, after what seemed like several hours of chaos, Eschiva found herself again on a stretcher, but this time the front was tied to one horse and the back to another, and in this improvised horse litter she began a new journey. Little Aimery was held in front of the saddle of one of the men, and her daughters were both riding pillion behind other men. Eschiva still had no idea exactly what was happening, beyond the assurance of the commander that he had come to rescue her.

They spent one night in another farmhouse, where the inhabitants were clearly in a state of alarm over their unexpected guests, but on the following night they arrived in a small town. Here Eschiva and the children were handed over to the care of nuns, and by the next morning Eschiva found that she and her daughters were the recipients of silk underwear, silk gowns, velvet surcoats, fur-lined cloaks, dainty slippers, sheepskin boots, silk scarves, and fur-lined hoods, as well as combs, soaps, perfume, and rouge for lips and cheeks. Where this wealth had come from she did not know, but she suspected it had been arbitrarily confiscated from some innocent individuals who had the misfortune of being roughly the same size as the captives.

Furthermore, in place of the two peasant women who had kindly tended them in the farmhouse, two hussies of dubious virtue were sent to attend them. The nuns were disapproving, but the women were assertive. They appeared determined to make Eschiva and her daughters look like they had been visiting at the court in Constantinople, rather than imprisoned in the hold of a ship and then at a peasant farmhouse.

After these women were finished dressing up the captives in their new finery, Eschiva and her children were escorted to a real horse litter, painted brightly red and gold and hung with damask curtains. Sitting two to a seat facing each other, they set off yet again. There could be little doubt, however, that whatever their next destination was, their fortunes had taken a turn for the better.

It was a four-day journey by horse litter from wherever they had been to Corycos. Nor would the Lusignans, who had never been there, have known where they were if their escort had not been intent on informing them.

“Corycos?” Burgundia asked. “Where’s that, Mama? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Cilicia,” Eschiva answered. She was not feeling well. Sitting upright all day in the horse litter left her dizzy and lightheaded to the point of nausea. She tried to swallow it down and did not want her daughters to notice. Fortunately, there was so much commotion outside the horse litter that even Burgundia did not seem aware of her mother’s state.

“All these people,” the eleven-year-old exclaimed excitedly. “They’re cheering and waving. You don’t think it’s because of us, do you?”

Eschiva forced herself to open her eyes and pull back the curtains to peek outside. Burgundia was right. The streets appeared to be lined with cheering crowds! Eschiva couldn’t remember anything like it since King Baldwin’s coronation—and to top it all off, trumpets were blowing.

Eschiva again risked a look out of the curtains. The people on the side of the road were throwing their hats in the air or waving them over their heads. The little cavalcade came to a halt, and Eschiva’s view was blocked by a big chestnut horse. The horse fretted, and the rider, in splendid armor and velvet cloak, flung himself to the ground. “I think we are about to be greeted by someone important,” Eschiva told her children, pulling back into the horse litter and letting the curtains drop into place so they could prepare themselves. “Aimery! Stop picking your nose and try to look like a young nobleman! Helvis, sit up straighter!”

From beyond the curtains a voice intoned, “Madame de Lusignan, welcome to Armenia. We assure you of the most gracious hospitality our humble land can provide until your husband arrives to escort you home.”

Eschiva appreciated that the man had not simply flung back the curtains as he might have done: this was a civilized man.

Taking a deep breath to collect and steady herself, she pulled back the curtains to smile out at the speaker. “Thank you, my lord, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you!” What else was she supposed to say? The world seemed to be spinning around her again. Everything was happening so fast.

Something moved behind the splendidly dressed man in the velvet cloak, but Eschiva had to close her eyes against the dizziness. She heard Burgundia explaining apologetically in an earnest child’s voice, “Forgive her, my lord. My Mama is not well.”

“I’m fine,” Eschiva protested weakly. “I’m just—”

"Hush." The voice was deep and close, and so familiar that Eschiva caught her breath in disbelief. It was a voice from her childhood, the voice of comfort in all her early nightmares. Even when the Saracens sacked Ibelin, he had ridden to the rescue. His hand was on her shoulder—dry and wiry but warm and reassuring. Eschiva's eyes flickered open to be absolutely certain this was no hallucination. "Uncle Balian?"

"Yes, 'chiva, I'm here. Don't worry. You're safe with my lord of Armenia, and now that we have seen you safely in our hands, we'll send word to Aimery. You're almost home." He squeezed her shoulder, and Eschiva sank back against the seat of the horse litter with tears of relief running down her face.

Kyrenia, March 1196

The harbor was packed with galleys, so many that not all could come alongside and several were moored beam to beam, clogging the harbor. The quay was hardly less busy, as scores of men were preparing to go aboard the waiting ships, and the last chests laden with gifts for Leo of Armenia were being carried precariously over the gangways.

John had been sent to stable his mother's and his own horse at the castle, but there had been no room left. Obviously, for the Dowager Queen they would have thrown some of the other horses out, but John preferred to take the horses to a good livery stable around the corner. He knew the proprietor and grooms at this establishment and trusted them more than the overworked castle grooms in the service of Barlais. Almost as important, he knew they'd look after Barry, too. (His beloved dog had been banned from this expedition.) But the diversion cost him a half-hour, and by the time he returned to the quay, King Aimery and his immediate entourage were preparing to embark.

John hurried around the edge of the curving harbor, dodging excited dogs, crates, and barrels of cargo awaiting ships displaced by the galleys. An attractive woman in a shawl smiled at him and he nodded to her, before he remembered where he'd seen her before: in the brothel. It was the madam who had mocked Haakon Magnussen, and John flushed to think he (a knight!) had acknowledged her in public. It was bad enough that he *recognized* her, but to dignify her with a greeting was terribly gauche.

Still flustered by his mistake, John joined the party clustered around

Lord Aimery, which included his mother. Maria Zoë was dressed for the sea voyage in practical gray-green cotton under a surcoat of forest-colored damask and a woolen cloak trimmed with beaver against the expected chill of the ocean air. The cloak appeared quite superfluous at the moment, however, as the sun was blazing down on them from a cloudless sky. Beyond the breakwater, the ocean glistened like a flat blue disk just lightly textured by a steady but moderate breeze.

The fine warm weather also mocked the Bordelais shipmaster, who appeared to be trying to dissuade Aimery from boarding. The sight of the Frenchman commanding this impressive array of ships sent a stab through John's heart. He still could not grasp that Magnussen was dead. In some part of his imagination, John had believed the Norseman was immortal, a man of legend more than flesh and blood, the kind of eternal hero that cannot die.

John was certain that Magnussen would have put to sea in a raging storm—let alone on a day like this—but the Frenchman was whining, "… Something's brewing." He frowned at the beautiful sky. "This is very early in the season for crossing—"

"We're not sailing for Sicily or France, for God's sake," Aimery retorted irritably. "We're only crossing from here to Corycos. That's little more than a hundred nautical miles, I'm told."

"Yes, we should be able to make the crossing in a day, but I'm not so sure about the return. This sunny calm won't last for long this time of year."

"Then no more dithering!" Aimery commanded. "I have sent word ahead to the good Lord of Armenia that I am coming with many notables to bring my lady and children home! I am not going to break my word—much less leave my bride and children in a stranger's hands a day longer—most especially not for a storm that no one can even see!" He turned from the evidently insulted seaman, took Maria Zoë firmly by the elbow, and guided her across the gangplank to the deck of his flagship.

Behind them, Dick de Camville followed quickly—but Philip, either to prove a point or in answer to a dare, tried to jump from the quay onto the railing of the ship without using the gangplank. He almost made it, started to fall backwards, and grabbed one of the lines tied up to the nearest pin rail to keep from falling. The line, however, was only loosely made fast, and Philip found himself spinning just above the level of the dock, hanging on like a terrified monkey. The incident attracted the attention of the sailors, who started hooting—while young Guy de Lusignan, who was being left behind, was laughing himself silly at his friend's precarious position.

"Philip!" John shouted angrily as he strode over. He grabbed hold

of the line above his brother's frantic clasp, and stopped the swing and spin of the rope. Philip let go of his hold to drop onto the quay, with a heartfelt, "Thanks, John."

"What the devil got into you?" John scolded. "This is no time for pranks and games!"

Philip, who had been genuinely grateful for his brother's intervention, now frowned and snapped, "Oh, leave me alone! I'm just getting my sea legs!"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" John snapped back. "Hurry! They're preparing to cast off!"

The brothers rushed together over the gangway, and the sailors standing by on either side hauled it in as their feet touched the deck. Forward, the lines were being cast off and the forward oars eased out to shove the bows gently away from the quay. Within a quarter-hour they had cleared the harbor and set sail, while the five remaining ships in their little flotilla straggled out of the harbor behind them.

Lusignan and his party were traveling on a big three-masted galley, an example of the finest and most modern of ships now coming off the skids of European shipyards from Tynemouth to Florence. The great seaborne expeditions to the Holy Land financed by the Kings of England and France in the last decade had given a dramatic boost to shipbuilding across Europe. Perhaps more important, they had given young naval architects an opportunity to demonstrate the advantages of their sometimes radical designs. This ship had no less than fifty-two oar-banks, twenty-six per side, which could each be manned by two men. She also carried three lateen sails on her three masts, the aftermost of which was stepped just ahead of a wheel rather than a tiller. The latter stood in front of a two-story deckhouse that provided luxury accommodations for a limited number of passengers, and more basic accommodations for the officers. The crew, both sailors and rowers, slept forward, in a lower and less solid deckhouse on the foredeck.

Lord Aimery had selected this ship to bring Eschiva and the children home because of the gracious accommodations, but Maria Zoë, no less than John, preferred to stay on the roof of those accommodations rather than go below. This was where the captain or his officers kept watch, as it provided a splendid overview of the entire length of the vessel, right to the low-lying bow with its long snout. The latter butted into the small waves, sending showers of spray upwards, but John found it stiff and awkward compared to the elegant, upward curving bow of the *Storm Bird*.

"It's a ram," his mother told him, when he grumbled about how ugly it looked. "It can be used to pierce the side of an enemy vessel

and sink it. It is based on the ships of the ancient Greeks. The snecka, in contrast, is essentially a Viking ship, designed to allow men to navigate up rivers and for beaching. A snecka cannot fight at sea."

"Magnussen could certainly fight with it!" John reacted as if his mother had insulted the dead Norseman.

"Magnussen used his ship as a fighting platform to launch his men against other crews, but he did not fight with the ship itself," his mother corrected.

With a sigh, John drew aside to grieve for his lost friend by staring out at the sea Magnussen had loved. He stood sharing the dead man's love for the endlessly shifting surface of the water, the play of light and shadow, and the unique smell of salt water on wind. Later John stood at the break of the poop to watch the helmsman for a while, wishing he could try his hand at the wheel, but he didn't dare ask. Lord Aimery wanted the fastest possible crossing, and that meant leaving the helm to the professionals.

They had a light midday meal below deck, and Maria Zoë remained there for the afternoon to escape the intensity of the sun. Only after they sighted land off their larboard bows late in the afternoon did she return on deck. The sun was behind them now as they steadily swept along the shore of Cilicia, the wind freshening across their larboard quarter. It was, in fact, ideal conditions for sailing and they were making at least ten knots, John estimated, trying to remember everything Magnussen had told him about judging the speed of a ship by its wake and the bubbles rushing by the side.

On land, the bright banners streaming from the towers of irregular fortifications dipped in apparent greeting, and as they swung north into the harbor of Corycos itself, they were greeted by fanfares of trumpets from both the island castle and the shore-side towers. They handed sail to take speed off the vessel and manned the oars to ensure maximum maneuverability.

A bright red tender flying a red banner with a lion rampant on it started toward them. A man standing braced against one of the benches signaled the Frankish galley to follow and then led them into a quay at which, with great pomp, a large number of people waited. There were priests and monks with silver incense burners, knights in gleaming armor, and ladies in bright-colored dresses. All looked very magnificent, yet there was still no mistaking Leo himself. He was dressed in jewel-studded robes, a massive sword in a jewel-encrusted scabbard at his hip.

Maria Zoë grumbled in an aside to John that they had not been warned they would be met at the quay; she had expected to have time to change before meeting the Armenian lord. She disappeared briefly

below deck to brush the snarls out of her hair, re-braid it, and change into shimmering silk veils, but none of the rest of them took the time to make any adjustments in their appearance.

Lord Aimery was standing very tensely at the poop rail, his eyes narrowed and his jaw set as he scanned the crowds for Eschiva and his children. “I can’t see them!” he growled in exasperation to Maria Zoë.

“I don’t think they’re there,” she assured him, scanning the crowd herself as the galley moved closer, half the oars already shipped to reduce speed. “No. They must have remained at the palace or wherever the feast will be. There’s Balian, beside and behind the Lord of Armenia.” She pointed, adding, “He would surely be with Eschiva if she were here.”

Aimery made a grimace that reflected just how worried he remained. Balian’s report had stressed that Eschiva had suffered no assault or abuse, but also that she was very weak and badly shaken by the experience. He had also related that the pirates had deliberately lied to her, saying Hugh had drowned, and she had grieved intensely for an infant she believed lost. She had almost not believed Balian’s assurances that Erik Andersen had managed to rescue the boy and bring him to Nicosia. Aimery, however, also knew that Balian was unlikely to have told him everything. Indeed, Eschiva herself would not have admitted all that she went through. He was tormented by his own imagination of what she must have undergone.

John, on the other hand, was suffering from a sense of deep shame that his father and Lord Aimery and even, exceptionally, his mother looked so plain and dowdy in the presence of this Armenian lord and his nobles. They were all in silks, velvets, and gold embroidery, while the Lusignans and Ibelins were dressed in cotton and linen. In John’s eyes his father was every bit as important as the Armenian prince, but although his father stood a head taller, he managed to hang back and give the impression of being a mere servant.

With a gentle clunk and a slight jolt, the galley went alongside the quay. A cheer went up; trumpets sounded. Aimery swung himself onto the ladder leading down to the main deck and descended face first like a sailor. John gallantly helped his mother descend more cautiously, facing backwards. By the time John had reached the deck, Philip and Dick de Camville had already jumped onto the gangway to proceed before their lord and bow before him as Lord Aimery went ashore. It was a brave (and John suspected improvised) attempt to give the Lusignan a touch of dignity, but quite pathetic compared to the Armenians’ display.

Leo of Armenia strode toward Lord Aimery with outstretched arms. As Lord Aimery started to bend his knee, he caught him and embraced

him instead. “My good and dear friend! Lord Aimery!” Leo’s voice carried across the quay. “Welcome to Cilicia! My house is yours!”

“My lord, there are no words equal to the depth of my gratitude for what you have done—” Aimery had prepared the speech, but he found himself overwhelmed by the situation nevertheless, and his voice caught slightly.

Leo of Armenia jumped in easily, “What I have done is not worth a word! It is only what any man of honor would have done, and for a lady of such perfect grace and innocence! I’m sure you would have done the same for me if our roles had been reversed. Come, I know how anxious you are to see with your own eyes that no harm has come to your lady or your children—and, I assure you, your impatience is only exceeded by *her* desire to lay eyes on *you*.” He took Lord Aimery’s arm and started leading him through the cheering public.

Balian fell in beside his wife and son. “How is Eschiva really?” Maria Zoë asked, confident that Lord Aimery could not hear her over the cheering and commentary provided by his host.

“She’s deathly ill,” Balian answered candidly. “I think only the hope of seeing Aimery and Hugh again keeps her alive. She is fundamentally bedridden. She can stay sitting up for an hour or two, but she can hardly stand at all without getting dizzy. She would have fainted dead away had she tried to come down and meet Aimery on the quay, as was originally planned.”

“What is it? Have you consulted physicians here?”

“Yes, but they only shake their heads and talk of humors and weak blood.” Balian shook his head in frustration. “I feel as if she needs to move more and breathe fresh air. When a man is wounded and immobilized, he loses strength in his healthy limbs just from inactivity. I can’t help feeling that part of Eschiva’s problem is that *because* she doesn’t move, she is getting weaker and weaker.”

“But if standing makes her dizzy . . . ” Maria Zoë pointed out, and her husband threw up his hands with a sigh. “What of the girls and little Aimery?” Maria Zoë asked next.

“Little Aimery is happy as a healthy puppy,” Balian assured her, “and Helvis also seems to have recovered well. She plays with the other girls and is already learning some Armenian. I’m more worried about Burgundia. She seems to feel she should stay with her mother, reading to her or playing chess. She is far too sober for a girl her age. Even our Helvis was more carefree—bossing Sidon around, actually.”

Maria Zoë laughed at the memory of their eldest daughter at Burgundia’s age. She was by then already betrothed to Reginald de

Sidon and, as Balian noted, had quite shamelessly taken advantage of her elderly bridegroom's kindness and chivalry. Returning to the present, she remarked, "Let's hope that once Burgundia gets safely back to Cyprus, she'll get over her current mood and become more cheerful again."

The sun was setting as they reached the Lord of Corycos' palace, which, as the largest and best-appointed residence in the port, was housing the freed captives and Leo himself. The Lord of Corycos had spared no expense to deck his residence with bunting and bright ribbons, and torches were lit all across the front of the building and on the roof as well. Lord Aimery was led up the interior stairway that wound around the courtyard toward a hall—but Eschiva, hearing the commotion in the courtyard, could not wait for him. She dragged herself to her feet, and leaning heavily on Burgundia's arm, made her way out into the corridor just as Aimery reached the top of the stairs. He saw her and ran to her, without a thought to his dignity. As he reached her she started to reel, the world spinning around her, and he grabbed her in a fierce grip. Eschiva closed her eyes and dropped her head on his chest.

"Sweetheart, can you ever forgive me?" Aimery whispered as her legs gave way. He held her upright only by the strength of his arms, conscious of how terribly light she was in them. She had lost a great deal of weight, and she had had none extra to lose three months ago, he registered.

"Hugh," was the first word out of Eschiva's mouth. "Is Hugh—"

"He's fine! I swear, he weighs more than you do!"

Eschiva smiled without opening her eyes. She just seemed to faint into a contented sleep. Aimery bent and slipped his arm under her knees to carry her into the room behind her. She came to again as he set her down on a large cushioned bench. She smiled up at him and whispered, "I love you, Aimery."

Leo of Armenia had arranged a magnificent banquet to honor the Lord of Lusignan and celebrate the reunion of husband and wife. In fact, he had arranged three days of feasting, hunting, and other entertainment. The day following the arrival of the Cypriots started with a Mass at the main cathedral to give thanks for the safe delivery of the captives. Eschiva declined to attend, but the three Lusignan children dutifully accompanied their father. Lord Aimery led his little namesake by the hand, and the two girls went before him. Their bright blond hair was brushed out and free for all to see under garlands of almond blossoms.

Maria Zoë, imperial princess that she was, had thought to bring something appropriate to wear, and looked suitably regal. She also provided gold-trimmed surcoats from her sea chest for her husband and son, but the Lusignan girls were dressed entirely in Armenian charity. The debt, John thought, just kept growing.

As they returned from Mass, with mouth-watering smells already seeping from the kitchens into the hall of the palace, the captain of Lord Aimery's galley appeared in an agitated state. "My lord," he announced in what John thought was a rude tone, "the wind has backed around to the north. If you leave now, we might just be able to ride that wind back to Kyrenia before the storm breaks. If not, you may spend far longer here than you ever planned." He pointed dramatically toward dark clouds building up in the north.

"We can't just depart!" Lord Aimery protested, embarrassed by the man's tone as much as by his message. "Look at all that the Lord of Armenia has prepared!" He gestured toward the activity around them.

But a cold wind was lifting the tablecloths from the tables set up in the courtyard, making the servants run about to weight them down. Maria Zoë shivered and wished she had her cloak.

"That storm brings snow and ice!" the captain insisted. "It could close down sea travel for weeks in its wake. Do you truly want to be away from Cyprus so long?"

"What is the problem?" Leo of Armenia returned, having noticed that his guest had been waylaid.

"My fleet captain insists there is bad weather in the offing," Lord Aimery admitted with a frown, "but I'm sure he exaggerates. We wouldn't want to disrupt the plans you so graciously made for us."

"My lord," the captain turned to appeal directly to the Lord of Armenia. "Look to the north! That's a storm from beyond Taurus."

The Armenian prince followed the captain's pointed finger and he, too, felt the chill on the breeze. He nodded. "Your captain is right, Lord Aimery. There is a dangerous storm brewing, the type that brings snow and sleet and freezing rain on a wind like a razor's edge. We would not keep you here for the sake of merriment when you need to get your family to safety. Make haste."

By the time the fleet cast off, the overcast had blotted out the blue sky except for a last strip low to the horizon in the southeast. The sea was already choppy, with whitecaps scattered liberally on the lead-gray water. The oars were shipped and the covers battened down as the galley raced before the wind. Aimery stayed with Eschiva and his children in the main cabin, but the Ibelins, including Philip, kept to the deck, watching as the sky behind them grew increasingly dark and

ominous.

By midday they were plunging through ten- to twelve-foot waves, and the captain had reefed all three sails. Maria Zoë clutched her cloak around her, the collar turned up so that it covered most of her cheeks right to the collarbone. Philip, on the other hand, was entertaining himself by trying to run up and down the poop, frequently staggering like a drunk because of the uneven lurching of the ship under his feet. John, annoyed by his antics, called for him to "stop being childish," but his father laid a hand on John's arm and shook his head.

"Let him be, John. Life will catch up with him soon enough. I wish you had had more years to be a playful colt. Of all the evil consequences of Hattin, one minor but nevertheless sad one was that it robbed you of your childhood."

Nonplused, John stared after his father, who had already turned away to follow the soaring of a seagull as it rode the wind overhead, cawing loudly. John had never thought about it like that, but with a twinge of guilty insight he realized that he was often sharp with Philip because he *envied* him his carelessness.

"I do hope we are ahead of that storm," Maria Zoë confessed her growing unease as the storm appeared to be inexorably catching up with them.

Her husband nodded soberly. "I admit, I'd feel happier in the *Storm Bird*. She could ride out anything!" He flashed a smile at John as he spoke, as if he knew these had been John's thoughts, too.

The captain was giving orders frantically, and shortly afterwards the helm was put up hard and the galley pitched down into the next trough, then lay hard on her side and seemed about to roll right over as they swung across the swells to head into the wind. "My God!" Maria Zoë gasped, clinging to the railing in terror. "What's happening?"

"I presume we're about to shorten sail again," Balian told her calmly, while Philip, frightened by this latest maneuver, sought proximity to his father. The four Ibelins stood together clinging to the rail and waited.

Sure enough, the crew made ready to hand the mainsail, casting the halyards off to the last turn, and ensuring the lines were free to run. For several nerve-racking moments, the booms of all three lateen sails shook and swung violently from side to side. The Ibelin party cowered at the very stern to be out of the way of the lashing and cracking canvas of the mizzen sail.

The galley was now pitching so violently that the bows came clear

out of the water before plunging down violently as the swell swept aft. The long ram smashed into the sea to be smothered in foam, and once or twice water washed completely over the foredeck. As the rushing water collided with the forward deckhouse, it broke into cascades of spray that splattered on the main deck like drenching rain.

"You might want to go below," Balian advised his wife.

"What? Now? My dear, if we're about to go down, we stand a better chance of survival here on deck."

"I don't think we're in any risk of foundering," Balian reassured her, "but I think I just felt the first drops of rain." Maria Zoë glanced toward the low-hanging overcast, but could see no rain.

Meanwhile the crew had managed to drag the mainsail down, one handful of shivering canvas at a time. As soon as the upper boom was lowered, the crew lashed the sail into a rough stow. Meanwhile, the helmsmen fell off the wind and the bows swung around again. Once more, the passengers clutched the railing and felt their stomachs lurch as the galley turned broadside to the waves and rolled on her side, putting the leeward gunnel well under water. But the bows continued around, and she soon righted herself. In a moment they were again running before the wind—but now, with just the fore and mizzen set, the ship appeared lighter and fleeter. She seemed to ride the tops of the waves, racing the whitecaps.

"I'm beginning to like this ship," Balian grunted to his eldest son. "What's she called?"

"Something boring like the *Pilgrim Angel*."

Balian roared with approving laughter, and John grinned with pleasure. It was not easy to make his father laugh like that. Then again, he seemed to laugh more recently than he had in the years immediately after the Treaty of Ramla, much less in that hellish period between Hattin and the arrival of the crusaders.

With the ship settled into a comfortable stride again, Philip wandered away to the front of the poop, interested in watching the helmsman. John turned and asked his father, "What did you think of Leo of Armenia?"

"A very fine prince and a good man."

"He was so generous—he reminded me of Richard of England, somehow, for all that he was slight and dark rather than big and blond."

His father nodded. "Very observant of you, John. I think they do have much in common, and in some ways I admire Leo of Armenia more. His father was treacherously murdered, and his brother was taken captive and held for ransom, yet I have seen no indication that

Leo has become bitter or overly suspicious of other men. He seems remarkably at ease in his own skin, candid and generous both."

"Did I understand correctly that he took the Prince of Antioch captive?" John asked cautiously.

"Yes, and he still has him, but he allowed me to meet with both Bohemond and his wife. They assured me they had been treated very courteously and provided with every luxury possible—except freedom. Leo's terms for their release were, if you like, mild, because he asked only that Bohemond accept Armenian sovereignty over Antioch—the exact reverse of the terms his brother had been forced to accept for his freedom. The problem is that while *Bohemond* was willing to agree to those terms, and sent his marshal to Antioch with Armenian troops to implement them, the citizens of Antioch were not. Since there were too few Armenian troops to resist the mob, they fled, leaving the citizens to proclaim Bohemond's son Raymond Prince of Antioch in his father's stead. This leaves poor Bohemond in an awkward position, to say the least. He is not sure what would become of him if he went home, but it also leaves Leo with a hostage of little value." Ibelin ended his narrative with a laugh. "Such is the absurdity of some diplomacy, John," he noted, glancing up at what he thought were more drops of rain.

At his inquiring glance, Maria Zoë again shook her head and declared, "I'm still happier here. Below deck, I promise you, half the inhabitants are violently seasick."

This was too true, so Balian turned again to John. "I like Leo, John, and he is a model of a good ruler, but there is a profound weakness in Armenia."

John looked over, surprised, and Balian continued, "It is in a sense a lawless land. Not that it *has* no laws, but strong men are too quick to ignore them. Central power is weak and only exercised when someone like Leo can win the loyalty of the scores of warlords who wield the real power. Such a system easily leads to despotism. Where power rests on strength rather than legitimacy, that power too often goes to the strongest rather than the best. Leo is a good prince, but his uncle was a very different man, who terrorized his people and plundered the wealth of the country. It is unimaginable that a youth like Baldwin IV could have ruled in Armenia; they would have torn him apart like wolves, or simply murdered him in his bed."

"But the disputes over who was the legitimate king of Jerusalem almost destroyed us," John protested. "Uncle Baldwin left, Tripoli made a separate peace, and then Montferrat and Lusignan undermined each other for years."

His father nodded as a rain shower pattered across the deck and

then fled. “What do you think would have been better?”

It was very dark on deck because of the low clouds. Furthermore, with the wind howling, the deck creaking, the canvas moaning, and waves rushing under the keel, they had to raise their voices to be heard. Yet words were whisked away by the wind as soon as they left the speaker’s mouth. It was almost as if they had never been said. So John risked it: “Didn’t you ever think that you would have made a better king than either of them, Papa? Didn’t you ever want to be King of Jerusalem?” As he spoke, John felt his mother’s gaze firmly upon him, and he sensed her almost amused approval. That was good, but it was his father’s answer he feared.

Balian gave his son the greatest compliment. He did not rebuke him or dismiss the question as impudent and inappropriate; instead he nodded thoughtfully and took his time answering. At last he looked John in the eye and admitted, “Yes, there were times when I thought I would make a better king than Conrad—much less Guy. But the price of grasping power would have been to make it dependent on force. Think of how Saladin lived in constant fear of someone doing unto him as he had done to others. Think of the Emperors of the Eastern Empire today—fearing the next assassin, the next palace coup. If I had seized power by force, I would have left an illegitimate legacy, one that secured *you* nothing. You would have had to fight for the Crown all over again—just as al-Afdal now fights for his father’s legacy—indeed for his very survival.” He paused to let this sink in, and his wife and son waited, sensing he was not finished.

“It seems to me, John, that the Constitution of Jerusalem is an excellent and wise foundation for government, because it gives precedence to the legitimate heirs of previous kings, while leaving to the High Court, much like the College of Cardinals or the monks of an abbey, the function of selecting between rival claimants the most suitable candidate. Certainly in the case of female heirs, the selection of the king consort lies firmly with the High Court, not the queen or her male relatives. If Sibylla and Guy had not bypassed the High Court at the time of her marriage, we would never have had the debacle of Hattin. It is the combination of hereditary and elected power that makes our Constitution strong. On the one hand it precludes the rise of adventurers and upstarts, but on the other hand it ensures that when a king *is* recognized by the High Court, then he has the support of his barons, bishops, and knights. That is something worth preserving, John. Henri de Champagne is not such a bad king, do you think?”

John’s answer was drowned out by a shout from the bows. Land was in sight. They had almost made it home.

They scuttled into the harbor of Kyrenia as the last light of day was squeezed out by the rain that came thundering down on decks, sea, and quay. In fact, they were flung violently against the quay, as the following seas broke against the stonework. Within minutes everyone, including the Ibelins, were completely drenched and fled to the castle. By nightfall, the rain had indeed turned to sleet, and howled around the walls of the castle so furiously that the shutters rattled and the smoke was forced back down the chimneys. It was a dreadful night even for the highborn, much less the poor, but Lord Aimery had brought his wife and children safely home.

† Greek: Κώρυκος; Latin Chronicles: Gorhigos

Chapter Twenty
A Crown for Cyprus

Nicosia, Cyprus,
May 1196

THE ARCHBISHOPS OF TRANI AND BRINDISI had been appropriately wined and dined, loaded with gifts, and bathed in praise. Now, at last, they had withdrawn to get a good night's sleep before continuing their journey via Limassol to Acre. There they were to prepare the way for the Holy Roman Emperor, who had announced his intention to lead an army to the Holy Land this year. Aimery had arranged for Barlais and Cheneché to escort his bishops as far as Limassol, and had no need to see them again before their departure. Eschiva, who had risen from her sickbed to gallantly play the role of consort with the grace and dignity innate to her, had retired exhausted. Aimery assured her he would come shortly, but first he needed to be alone, and so he dismissed his squires.

King Aimery—*Aimericus Rex*.

Aimery stared at the crown and scepter in awe. Having accepted his homage in proxy, Henry VI Hohenstaufen had entrusted the regalia of monarchy to the worthy Archbishops of Trani and Brindisi and tasked them with delivering crown and scepter to Aimery de Lusignan. The Emperor had also sent the message that he expected his "subject state of Cyprus" to welcome, provision, and support him with men, horses, arms, and supplies in his coming expedition to retake Jerusalem. It was to further this great cause that the Emperor had seen fit to accept the "submission" of Cyprus to his rule and had raised Aimery up from "lord" to "king."

The Emperor added the admonishment that Aimery must reconcile with the King of Jerusalem, the Archbishops had intoned. The kings of two Christian countries on the forefront of the struggle against the Antichrist, they lectured pompously, could not be enemies. As for the coronation itself, the Archbishops suggested that could best take place when the Emperor himself came to Outremer and could personally place the crown on Aimery's head.

Aimery had no objection. He could certainly wait a few months for the formal ceremony. The point was that both the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor had *accepted* the principle that Cyprus should be a kingdom. The writs were signed and sealed. Jubail had done homage in Aimery's name. The crown and scepter lay before him. He would date his reign from this day: May 18, 1196.

Aimery took the crown and held it between his two hands. It was composed of a solid-gold base and large panels of gold, each encrusted with large stones: sapphires, rubies, emeralds, and opals. It was a "closed" crown after the Eastern fashion: two bands of gold, each nearly an inch wide, curved up from the sides to meet over the center of the head. Standing upright on the double-thick meeting point of these two bands was a cross with an amethyst the size of an almond set in it. It was very heavy: Aimery estimated four to five pounds. The inside of the crown was lined with velvet so it could be worn in comparative comfort.

Aimery looked around the room once more to be sure he was alone, and then he placed the crown on his head. It sat snugly on his forehead, not too tight nor too loose. But the cross unbalanced it somewhat, unlike a well-fitted helmet. He had to hold his head absolutely upright, or the weight of the cross tipped his head one way or another. He reached up and removed the crown from his head to look at it more closely.

The workmanship was magnificent. The Holy Roman Emperor had either spent a fortune—or he had captured it somewhere and held it in reserve for an appropriate occasion. Or, Aimery frowned, it might be Isaac Comnenus' crown. Richard of England had seized that as part of the loot he'd taken when capturing the island. Very probably it had ended up in Henry VI's hands as part of the English King's ransom to the Hohenstaufen.

The thought pleased Aimery as he turned the crown around in his hands, looking for indications of Greek workmanship that would support this theory. Aimery was not an expert, but he thought the settings of the stones were more Greek than Latin in style. Maybe Maria Zoë would know. At an appropriate time, he would ask her to look at it. He would also ask her about the crown she had sold to Isaac in the year after Hattin. It had been her coronation crown, sent with her from Constantinople. It ought to be a perfect fit for Eschiva, if they could only locate it in time. Aimery had not forgotten that he'd promised to make Eschiva a queen, and after all she had gone through this past winter, he was more determined than ever to see her crowned.

If this *was* Isaac Comnenus' crown—Aimery's attention returned to

the crown in his hands—then it would establish an important bridge to the past. He hoped that his subjects (what a lovely word!) would be proud to be part of a kingdom. His Frankish supporters had definitely liked the idea! Barlais and Henri de Brie had been loudest in their glee—and immediately demanded the title of "baron." "We'll lay our hands in yours first thing tomorrow morning!" Barlais had declared. "Or, well, as soon as we return from seeing the Archbishops off."

Aimery had no objection to that idea, either. The sooner he bound these proud fighting men to him, the better. And not just them. Aimery had spent hours poring over maps of the island identifying, based on lists of Byzantine dignitaries and their landholdings, just how many fiefs the island could support. He estimated the island could support some three hundred knights and two hundred mounted sergeants. Nothing to what the Kings of Jerusalem had *once* commanded, but not so much less than the King of Jerusalem commanded *today*.

Aimery wanted those knights and sergeants to be his own men. He was fortunate, he reckoned, that so many of the Greek lords had already fled the island. They had been emigrating since the time of Isaac Comnenus, because of his onerous taxes and erratic behavior. The exodus had increased under Templar rule and during the tragic interlude under Guy. The Greek aristocracy, after all, usually had lands on the mainland or houses in Constantinople to which they could withdraw. The armed struggle had been left to the lower classes and led by the Church, not the nobility. Fortunately. Aimery suspected he would have had a much harder time putting down the unrest if he'd been facing fighting men rather than priests, pirates, and peasants.

Now, however, he saw an even greater advantage in their conspicuous absence: he had land to distribute. All he needed to do was lure the disinherited fighting men of Jerusalem to Cyprus—just as Cheneché, Brie, Jubail, Rivet, and the Ibelins had come already.

Obviously, if there were Greek lords still occupying their estates, he would not expel them, provided they did homage to him. So the first thing he had to do was send out clerks to the fiefs listed in the tax registers to find out which were de facto vacant and which were still occupied. He would then demand homage of those still present, and any man who refused would see his lands expropriated to the Crown. After that, he would know just how many Greek knights had accepted his rule and how many vacant fiefs were left over. Once he knew exactly what lands he had to bestow on worthy men, he could start recruiting.

As his eye fell again on the crown, however, he reminded himself

that he did not want to end as Isaac Comnenus had—driven from the island by the indifference and betrayal of his own subjects. If the Greek Emperor decided to reclaim the island, the Holy Roman Emperor *might* send aid—or he might not. Or his assistance might arrive too late. He would not be able to hold the island against any hostile power, whether it was the Greek Emperor or the Sultan of Cairo, with just three hundred knights and two hundred sergeants—not if he had no infantry. And the infantry would have to be drawn from the Greek population.

Which was why this peace Ibelin had made with the Greek archbishop made so much sense. Let the Greeks have their own churches and their own laws, as long as they paid taxes to the Crown. And those taxes didn't have to be tithes for land. On an island as rich as this, he could tax (as the Greek Emperors had done) the timber and the mines, the tanneries, potteries, and glassworks, the wine presses and the oil presses, the taverns and bathhouses, the mills, and the markets. Not only that, there were harbor dues and anchorage, salvage, customs, and export duties. There were so many different ways of raising revenue that no single tax need be particularly high. The key would be to spread the burden across all layers of society and all professions. Manuel I had understood that very well, based on what the Cypriot tax officials had reported to him.

Again Aimery nodded to himself. Ibelin was wise. Restoring the laws of Manuel I not only quieted the fears of the native population and cloaked his laws in legitimacy, they also gave him more than adequate revenues—provided, of course, that the island returned to normal levels of economic activity. That might take a couple of years, even half a decade.

No matter. He had no need for coffers full of gold. He'd lived frugally all his life (in contrast to Guy), and Eschiva was anything but a spendthrift. She had always shown a prudent capability to hold their income together and prioritize expenditures, always meeting her own needs last. That was about to change. Even at current low levels of prosperity, the revenues of the Cypriot Crown vastly exceeded anything Aimery and Eschiva had ever had at their disposal in the past. They were, from what the clerks told him, at least double the revenues of his once rich father-in-law, the Baron of Ramla and Mirabel.

Then again, he would need a considerable fortune to outfit knights for a new crusade, if the Emperor really came to the Outremer. After a second, Aimery resolved to worry about that later. The Emperor might not come at all. He was anything but pious, Aimery reflected cynically. In fact, he was a self-serving, cynical bastard—and Aimery,

for one, would be happy for him to stay where he was. The crown was here.

Aimery took it again in his hands, full of wonder, admiration, and satisfaction—only to feel a stab of guilt. He was acting no better than the greediest sultan. Worse, perhaps. In sincere contrition, he dropped to his knees and closed his eyes. "Dear God, in the name of your Son, protect this crown and the men who will wear it. Protect them from excessive greed, excessive pride and hubris. Grant the men who wear this crown wisdom, compassion, and piety instead. Inspire them to rule over this island kingdom judiciously and prudently for the good of their subjects, both high and low, Greek and non-Greek, men and women. Most of all, dear God, make me worthy of this crown, that I may pass it to my sons with due humility and go to You when my time comes. Amen."

Paphos, Cyprus, September 1196

They had opened all the windows of the tower room to let the sea breeze inside in the vain hope of cooling it down. Although the breeze helped, the temperature at this time of year was still oppressively hot, and Ibelin had dispensed with stifling armor to dress in nothing but a yellow silk surcoat over a pale-blue cotton shirt and hose of the same color. His feet were shod in comfortable, low leather shoes, and his head was bare. Maria Zoë was likewise dressed for the heat of high summer in a loose silk shift, over which she wore a crinkled cotton surcoat with long, loose sleeves. The shift was cream-colored, the surcoat a transparent green, and both materials were so light that even the slightest breeze lifted and fluttered them.

John burst in on his parents excitedly. "Pomegranates!" he announced, carrying a small basket before him.

Maria Zoë looked over with a smile, exclaiming, "Isn't it too early?"

"They're from Troodos, the vendor told me. He said up in the mountains, the first frosts have come."

"Have you tried one?" Balian asked, coming over to inspect the fruit in John's basket. John watched his father's expression eagerly. Ibelin had been famous for its pomegranate orchards, and John knew that pomegranates were his father's favorite fruit. Now Balian could not resist taking one of the fruits, still half yellow, and with his eating knife he lopped the top off.

Maria Zoë came down from her perch in the window seat, and snatched a glass bowl from a mosaic table beside the cold fireplace to

bring it to her husband. He was already intent on carefully cutting the outside skin of the pomegranate. When the fourth cut was finished, he set the knife aside and broke the pomegranate open over the glass bowl. Some kernels fell into the bowl, but more clung to the membrane of the pomegranate, and Balian started to pick them free with the tip of his knife.

John watched with satisfaction. This was a scene from his childhood: his father gently extracting the kernels of a pomegranate for his mother. It was a ritual. Maria Zoë loved the fruit nearly as much as Balian did, but hated getting her fingers stained by pomegranate juice or the squirts of juice (inevitable in the process of picking it clean) on her dress. The kernels of this pomegranate were a very light ruby color, rather than garnet, but when Maria Zoë reached for the first little handful her face lit up in delight. "Wonderful!"

"Are they?" Balian asked. As if he doubted her word, he helped himself to a generous handful. His expression gave him away before he nodded in satisfaction and looked over at the basket to remark, "I don't think these are going to last very long. Can you find the vendor again?"

John laughed. "I can do better! I was thinking, we should ask him to take us to the source. I could do with a long ride out of the city. What do you think?"

"If there's been frost in the mountains already, it should be much cooler there as well," Maria Zoë noted. "I'd like some respite from the heat."

"We could take a picnic," John enthused, "and make a day outing of it!"

Balian looked from his son to his wife. "Is this a conspiracy?"

"Hardly," Maria Zoë countered, "but you *have* been working very hard lately."

"There's so much to do," Balian countered with a sigh and a glance at the papers spread out across the table. He had been in Paphos almost a year, although he had not been officially granted the fief until Aimery had received the crown of Cyprus this past May. Ever since their arrival, however, Balian had sought to establish a functioning administration. He had attempted to engage the professional bureaucrats from Isaac Comnenus' reign or before—but some of these men had left, others were old or corrupt, and yet others were hostile to the Franks. Finding out who they could trust had been a painful process of trial and error.

At the same time, they had faced the acute need to re-establish law and order on the streets and offshore. Petty crime, theft, and even

assaults were rampant in the city at night, and while Famagusta had been a pirates' nest, Paphos was a smugglers' den. The ships trading here were almost all merchantmen, roundships more than galleys, but their cargoes were mostly contraband. No one took kindly to someone trying to tax them. After a half-decade doing as they pleased and reaping 100 per cent of the profit, neither shipmasters nor merchants much cared if the duties Ibelin was trying to enforce dated back to the reign of Manuel I Comnenus or not.

No sooner had Ibelin reopened the customs house on the quay, manned entirely with customs officials who had previously served the Greek Emperor, than ships started trying to avoid the harbor and landing their cargoes at various nearby coves and bays. Ibelin had engaged Erik Andersen to patrol the coastline, offering him 100 per cent of the customs duties of any ships he seized and brought back to port for a full year—the contract to be renegotiated at that time. Andersen had raised credit from the Venetians, using the customs duties he anticipated as collateral, in order to build a small snecka. *Haakon's Ghost* soon struck terror in the hearts of the smugglers, and most preferred to pay customs duties rather than risk an encounter with the Norsemen. Still, resentment simmered among the ship owners and importers alike.

The hostility of the shopkeepers, millers, tavern owners, and bath keepers was if anything greater, because their profit margins were lower in the first place. There had been a minor riot in the market when Ibelin's men had come to collect the market dues. Another ugly incident occurred when the bakers went on strike to protest the higher cost of wheat, which they blamed on the fact that the new Latin landlords were now collecting rents again. . . .

Meanwhile, since the opening of the sailing season, more and more immigrants from the Holy Land were turning up in Cyprus generally and Paphos specifically. The news of the peace the previous fall had been rapidly overshadowed by the spectacular story of the Lady of Lusignan's kidnapping. Men hearing of that audacious raid concluded that Cyprus was still a wild and dangerous place. But when Cyprus was made a kingdom under a Latin King, men revised their opinion. It helped that King Aimery sent repeated invitations to "men with skills, trades, and courage" to join him in "rebuilding" the island.

Many of the newcomers were Syrian Christians, who despite speaking Arabic, shared most of the traditions and theology of the Greek Orthodox Church, but there were also Samaritans and Jews among the recent immigrants, as well as Latin Christians. What they all had in common was the loss of their homes, their possessions, and often their loved ones in the collapse of the Kingdom of Jerusalem

following Hattin. Some had been in Saracen slavery; others had escaped only to find themselves homeless, penniless, and superfluous in the surviving Christian cities of Tyre, Acre, and Jaffa. On the whole they were willing and able to work, but they did not necessarily have favorable attitudes towards the Cypriots. There had been tavern brawls and even some more sinister acts of violence arising from the tensions between the native Cypriots and the immigrants.

All the problems eventually ended up on the Lord of Ibelin's plate, because he was now recognized—whether reluctantly or not—as Lord of Paphos.

"Come," Maria Zoë urged, reaching out to lay her hand on her husband's. "Let's take a day off and ride to the pomegranate trees—wherever they may be—tomorrow."

Balian took a deep breath and was about to say "yes," when a knock at the door interrupted him. He looked over, and John went to answer the door.

On the far side stood Ayyub ibn Adam, the apprentice mason. The young man was dressed like a Cypriot merchant or bureaucrat in a linen kaftan, belted at the waist. He was bearded and wore a wooden cross prominently on his chest. He bowed deeply to John and then, looking deeper into the room, to Ibelin.

"Ah, Ayyub!" Ibelin smiled and gestured for him to come forward—but then, noticing he was alone, he asked a little sharply, "Where is Master Moses?" Although bit by bit the drainage system had been repaired and whole sections of the city now had working sewers, the aqueduct was still not working. Balian had convinced himself that if he could get the fountains working again, the mood of the public might turn more favorable.

"Master Moses wasn't feeling very well this morning," Ayyub explained apologetically, bowing again in embarrassment.

Ibelin grimaced. The one-handed master builder was unquestionably a disappointment. Far from being grateful for this new opportunity, he had proved difficult. He complained about the tools, the workers, the prices, the food, and even the weather. He had excuses for every setback, never taking responsibility for his own mistakes or inaction. Recently he had also taken to drink. Ibelin frowned and snapped irritably, "What did he do? Drink too much last night?"

Ayyub looked down and squirmed in discomfort, but he answered loyally, "I think he ate some bad shellfish."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that he was going to report yet another delay, would it?" Ibelin snarled.

John and Maria Zoë exchanged a look. It was this irritability that

they found both alienating and worrying. The pomegranates had for a magical moment brought back the Balian they knew and loved, but now he was frowning and angry again.

"My lord." Ayyub lifted his head and took a visible breath. "I think I've found a solution."

"Meaning what?" Ibelin asked warily.

"May I show you?"

Ibelin nodded. Ayyub stepped forward, pulling a scroll of parchment out of his sleeve. He rolled the drawings out on the table and began explaining them. "Here is the source," he indicated a spot in the upper right-hand corner. "The path of the Roman aqueduct ran here, through this limestone hill and out the other side. We have, as you know, cleared and repaired all the visible breaks in the aqueduct without water flowing. The only logical explanation is that something is blocking the water here—inside the tunnel."

Ibelin nodded.

"So, I climbed into the tunnel and followed it until I found where it had collapsed."

Ibelin cast the young man a look of approval that made Ayyub stand up straighter, even before Ibelin said, "Well done. And what did you find?"

"I went in from both directions, and a second time had men enter from the other entrance at the same time, measuring the distance. When we reached the blockages, we shouted and pounded on rock but could hear nothing of one another. If we measured the distance correctly, the two blocked passages are separated by a mile or more."

"That doesn't sound good," Ibelin observed dryly.

"No," Ayyub admitted, but he was still standing upright, and Ibelin saw excitement in his eyes. "I don't think we can clear the tunnel, my lord," he started in a slightly breathless voice. "It would be very dangerous work, and it would be very expensive. We'd have to prop up the roof of the tunnel at short intervals all along the way. What I thought, however," he hastened to get to the good news, "was that we could divert the water here." He pointed on the map. "I've surveyed the land, and with a detour of just four miles, we could keep the water flowing downhill to reconnect with the aqueduct down here."

"If it's possible, why didn't the Romans take that route?" Ibelin asked skeptically. Although what he'd seen of Ayyub had impressed him, he was still only an apprentice mason, and Ibelin had a hard time believing he could solve a problem like this. On the other hand, Ayyub didn't complain, and he worked very long hours while his master was lounging about in taverns or sleeping off the wine he consumed there.

Ayyub had also picked up Greek at an amazing pace, and had started calling himself "Antonis" so he blended in better. He wore the cross, too, Ibelin supposed, to underscore that he *was* Christian, even if his native tongue was Arabic.

Ayyub shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't know, my lord. Maybe the Romans felt it was beneath their dignity to make a detour. The Romans liked straight lines."

To everyone's relief, Ibelin laughed. Then he looked more closely at Ayyub. "You really think you can do this?"

"Yes, my lord. And it's not just me. One of the Greek masons showed me the pass."

"Ah." That not only made sense, it sounded like cooperation. That was very good news. "So you've befriended one of them, have you?"

"Well, actually, I get along with *all* of them, my lord," Ayyub admitted immodestly. It was Moses who was constantly quarreling with them. His tendency to criticize, insult, shout, and blame had caused them to lose several of their best workers.

"I'm beginning to think I should have asked you to report to me alone before now," Ibelin concluded. Although it went against the grain to speak to a man's subordinate, there were times when it was necessary and valuable. "Ayyub—or should I say Antonis?"

"I prefer Antonis, my lord."

"Good. Antonis. This Greek mason, is he a master?"

"Yes, my lord."

Ibelin glanced at Maria Zoë, and she moved over to the far side of the table.

"Do you think this Greek master mason could take charge of the project?"

Antonis looked disappointed, but he nodded.

"Antonis, I want you to finish your training. It is the best thing for *you*. Equally important, nothing leads to resentment faster than raising an unqualified man above a qualified one simply because of his connections. If I put you in charge before you have completed your training—before you are a journeyman, much less a master—everyone would say it is because you are my protégé, because you came from the Kingdom of Jerusalem."

Antonis hung his head in defeat.

"If, however, you finish your training under this Greek master, you will gain credibility here—and, I promise, when you are finished, I will employ you. There is so much to do. I want a proper castle, for a start, and the Pope has promised to establish a Latin diocesan

structure on Cyprus. I expect Paphos to be named an ecclesiastical see. A Latin bishop will want a proper Latin cathedral. Last but not least, I've already had letters from the Benedictines inquiring about a possible monastery here. If you get my aqueduct finished, you and this Greek master mason will be commissioned for the castle. Then—what? —five years from now?—you will be a master mason, and I can entrust you with the new projects. Does that sound fair enough?"

Antonis seemed to think for a minute, but then he nodded. "Yes, my lord. That is fair."

"Then I want you to bring me this Greek master mason. I need to meet him, but—"

The pounding on the door this time was not polite but urgent, and Ibelin spun about, frowning already.

The door opened without waiting for anyone to call "come in" and Sir Galvin burst in, shoving a man with his hands tied behind his back in front of him. "We got him, my lord!" he announced more grimly than triumphantly, as he pushed the man down on his knees.

Antonis instinctively backed out of the way as Ibelin crossed the room toward the prisoner. The man on his knees was middle-aged and fat, with a puffy face around small, watery eyes. For a criminal receiving this kind of treatment, he was exceptionally well dressed, in a long caftan over which he wore a cloak wrapped like a Roman toga. He had a gold collar and gold rings on his fingers to underline the point that he was not a poor man.

"Who is this, and what makes you so sure he's the man?" Ibelin asked. Sir Galvin had been sent to find out who was behind the brutal beating of a recent settler, a Jacobite from Maria Zoë's dower city of Nablus, who had set up a new bathhouse near the center of town. He charged the same prices as in Acre, which were substantially cheaper than the going rate in Paphos, and the Cypriot bath owners had come to Ibelin to protest. Balian had told them that they were overcharging and he had no intention of intervening. They had responded by spreading the rumor that Ibelin was taxing them more than the new immigrant, groaning that they were being ruined by his taxes. This had led to many natives boycotting the new establishment for a while, but the Latins and other settlers supported the newcomer. He had continued to prosper until two weeks ago, when he had been found in a gutter so badly beaten he was unconscious and slowly bleeding to death. He'd been carried to the castle, and Ibelin had sent for a doctor. Although the man was now on his way to recovery, Ibelin had vowed to find out who was behind this and publicly sentence them.

"His name is Niketas Blemidas. He owns the bathhouse near St. Solomoni, and one of his own customers betrayed him," Sir Galvin

answered smugly. Ibelin just raised his eyebrows, and Sir Galvin continued readily, “Said’s bathhouse has been closed ever since he was beaten within an inch of his life, and so people naturally went back to the other bathhouses. One of the customers overheard this pig bragging about how he’d ‘put an end’ to the ‘Syrian’s trade,’ and with any luck his rival would either die or ‘go back where he came from.’”

“Has he confessed?” Ibelin asked.

“You want a confession?” Sir Galvin asked, surprised. “Give me half an hour—if it takes that long.”

“Wait,” Maria Zoë interceded, not sure her husband, in his current mood, wouldn’t give Sir Galvin permission to torture the prisoner. Coming across the room, she addressed the prisoner in Greek, “Do you know who I am?”

The man looked down and mumbled, “Maria Comnena.”

“Yes. Correct. Do you know why you are here?”

“Your husband is determined to put me out of business. He hates me and all Cypriots.”

“Did he just say what I think he said?” Ibelin angrily asked his wife. She made a calming gesture and continued with her interrogation. Starting (to her husband’s outrage) with: “Yes, of course,” before continuing, “That’s why he’s repaired the drainage, has stopped the smuggling, and is working on restoring water flow to the city. But given the fact that he hates all Cypriots, why do you suppose he’s picking on you?”

“How should I know?” the man growled, sending Ibelin a look of loathing. “But if he tries to harm me, you’ll see the whole city rise up in rebellion!”

Ibelin’s Greek had been steadily improving, and he recognized the word “epanastatis”—rebellion. He had heard it all too often since his arrival here. He stiffened.

“Rebellion?” Maria Zoë asked back. “Why?”

“Because I’m a respected man from a good family. People look up to me!” the prisoner insisted. “Barbarians like your husband and his hounds have no right to lay a hand on me.” He looked up at Sir Galvin with contempt.

Maria Zoë spoke to her husband in French. “I think Sir Galvin is right and that this is the man behind the beating. However, I don’t think it would be wise to torture him just yet. He’s a bully, and right now he believes he has many friends and supporters who will rally around him. If you put him alone in a dungeon and leave him there for a few days, he may start to see the world a little differently.”

Ibelin nodded with resignation and gestured for Sir Galvin to take the prisoner away. He found the entire exchange very discouraging. “That man nearly murdered another man just because he works harder, and he calls *us* barbarians!” Ibelin shook his head.

Leaving, Sir Galvin nearly collided with the next party seeking an audience with Ibelin: Father Andronikos, accompanied by his wife and daughter. At the sight of Eirini, John’s face lit up, and he hastened across the room to welcome her and her parents. Andronikos’ wife, however, had caught sight of Maria Zoë and was intent on greeting her, her daughter in her wake. Father Andronikos was left smiling in the doorway. Because they were still separated by the language barrier, Ibelin called to his son, “John! I need a translator.”

The last thing John wanted to do was leave Eirini’s side, but he could not ignore a direct order from his father. Nor, in light of their fight the year before, did he want his father to think he had not grown up. With a bow to Eirini, he dutifully joined his father, who told him to greet Father Andronikos, assure him he was welcome, and ask his purpose.

Father Andronikos blessed Ibelin before answering John’s question about his purpose. “Well, the girls insisted they needed to come shopping,” he remarked with an indulgent glance toward his wife and daughter, “but I also have a request from Father Neophytos.”

Balian indicated they should sit in the window seat, and the three men crossed to it. John sat next to Father Andronikos, so he had a clear view to Eirini, still dutifully standing beside her mother as the latter deluged his own mother with a flood of words.

“The good work you have been doing to clear out the pirates has reached Father Neophytos’ ears,” Father Andronikos announced and John translated.

Ibelin dismissed the remark with a deprecating gesture. “Andersen had been dealing with smugglers more than pirates,” he noted.

Father Andronikos just smiled knowingly. “But it has not escaped Father Neophytos’ ears that you have been just as harsh with the Pisans and Genoese as with the Greeks and Cypriots.”

“Smuggling is smuggling,” Ibelin answered firmly and John translated a little distractedly, because Ayyub/Antonis had joined the women and was engaging Eirini in conversation. The young man was bronzed by the sun, muscular and, John felt, far too good-looking. He certainly didn’t like the way Eirini was smiling up at Antonis—practically the same way she smiled at him!

Father Andronikos was answering, and John had no choice but to focus on the conversation he was translating. “You may not know, but

four years ago, when the Templars ruled the island, the Bishop of Paphos, a very wise and pious man by the name of Basil Kinnamos, felt he must personally bring word to the Patriarch in Constantinople of the terrible things that were happening here. He took ship at Paphos—but never arrived in Constantinople. There were no storms in the period he was traveling; it was summer. It is widely believed that he was seized by Pisan or Genoese pirates, who are known to have attacked a ship from Cyprus bound for Constantinople off Rhodes." John indicated that Father Andronikos should stop so he could translate this monologue.

As was to be expected, Ibelin was suitably outraged, but also quick to point out that he had no way of knowing what had happened four years ago. At the time, he reminded the Greek priest, he had been focused solely on the fight against Saladin.

"I understand, but Father Neophytos was hoping your Norseman might be able to persuade the Genoese and Pisans that fall into his hands to be more forthcoming about the fate of the good Bishop Basil."

"I can certainly ask him to question anyone—or indeed, *everyone*—who might be able to shed light on this incident," Ibelin promised. Meanwhile, Eirini's laughter floated across the room like the chiming of a bell, making John tense with jealousy.

"That is all we are asking," Father Andronikos assured him with a smile, adding, "Father Neophytos thinks it would mean a great deal to the people here if the fate of their beloved bishop could be discovered. If the men responsible could be brought to justice, it would *certainly* go a long way to reconcile the inhabitants of Paphos to the new regime," he added.

As John translated, the priest pushed himself back to his feet with his hands on his knees and declared, "And now I'd better go rescue your lady from my wife, who will otherwise talk her ear off. Good day, my lord. And to you, too, young—no, *Sir* Janis." He held out his hand to John, and smiled particularly warmly at the young man—before firmly taking his wife and daughter by their arms. With a bow to Maria Comnena, he escorted his daughter and wife out of the chamber.

John was left behind, frustrated and simmering with jealousy, as Ayyub/ Antonis saw Eirini halfway to the door, bowing gallantly as she left.

Kyrenia, Cyprus, November 1196

It was one of those deceptively mild autumn days that Ibelin was already coming to expect on Cyprus. The sun warmed the air to summery temperatures. The breeze was light. The water was turquoise and aquamarine, and it sparkled like diamonds where the wind ruffled it. The ship gliding through the harbor entrance was flying all her bunting in a gaudy display reminiscent of a tournament field. Yet Ibelin's eyes were drawn to the banner flying from the mainmast, high above the other bright-colored banners: the simple white with gold of Jerusalem.

The sight of it as it stretched out on a puff of wind stabbed Ibelin's heart. No matter how much he *liked* being on Cyprus, the crosses of Jerusalem were an admonishment. He had not set eyes on the Holy City since the day he marched away after the surrender. And better so, men who had made the pilgrimage told him. The cross had been replaced by a crescent moon over the dome of the Temple of God, and the façade of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was covered with Arabic graffiti.

Ibelin shook himself and concentrated on the present. On the deck of the ship gliding toward the quay was Henri de Champagne. He was dressed in rich robes of white silk trimmed with gold embroidery, and on his head he wore a flamboyant hat of cloth of gold bordered with white satin. He was not yet thirty years old, and looked young and fresh to Ibelin. Or was he himself just getting grizzled?

Trumpet fanfares sounded in welcome, and the population of Kyrenia had turned out in great numbers. They appeared flattered by (or at least curious about) a visit from the King of Jerusalem. Guards had to keep the crowds from flooding onto the quay, and people had clambered to the rooftops and crushed onto the balconies of the houses lining the harbor in such numbers that Ibelin wondered that the balconies didn't break.

With a gentle thunk Champagne's ship went alongside, and the gangway was hastily shoved out and onto the quay. Ibelin approached the foot of the gangway, and Champagne sprang lightly onto the other end. He crossed the gangway with easy strides, and when Ibelin went to bow to him, pulled him up into an embrace instead. "Father!" Champagne exclaimed loudly for the crowd, before turning to John and embracing him as well, calling him "Brother!"

"Welcome to Cyprus, my lord," Ibelin continued with the protocol. "If you are not too exhausted, horses await"—he gestured with his hand to the finely caparisoned horses waiting just beyond the quay —"so that I may escort you directly to my lord King of Cyprus at St. Hilarion. It is a ride of only five to six hours. We can make it before

dark if we depart at once."

"Of course, of course," Champagne agreed at once, smiling graciously and waving to the cheering crowds around them.

He did it very well, Ibelin noted, with a boyish enthusiasm that was quite pleasing. Philip of France had always looked as if he detested cheering crowds, while Richard of England had acted as if cheers were his natural right. Champagne, in contrast, looked flattered by the applause—and that was endearing.

As they reached the horses, Georgios sprang down from his own mount to hold Champagne's off stirrup, while the king mounted the borrowed (but excellent) stallion. When everyone was ready, Ibelin led the way through the crowd with Champagne beside him. John and Champagne's entourage of six knights followed in their wake.

The noise of the crowd and their obligation to acknowledge it prevented conversation until they had passed out of the city. Here they picked up an easy trot for the first part of the winding road up the face of the mountain, and Ibelin addressed Champagne. "Did all go well in Armenia, my lord?"

"Splendidly! Bohemond has been released," Champagne exclaimed enthusiastically. "Bohemond's eldest son Raymond will marry Leo's niece, the daughter of Leo's elder brother."

Ibelin nodded; he had heard of this agreement from the men who came to inquire if King Aimery would receive Henri of Champagne on his return from Armenia to Acre. "It was Leo's plea that I reconcile with Aimery that was the last straw," Champagne added with a winning smile. "The High Court has been pressing me to make peace with him practically from the day he left the Kingdom, and the Bishops of Trani and Brindisi lectured me *ad nauseam* about the need for all Christian monarchs to join together—quite a piece of hypocrisy for two men representing the monarch who so vilely imprisoned my uncle!" Champagne could not resist noting with a disgusted snort.

"I think I could have ignored *them*," Champagne continued, "but not Leo of Armenia. He was so sincere. He appears to have loved your brother very well," Champagne ventured with a sideways glance.

Ibelin nodded. "My brother was a likable man—generous and jovial, and a good man to have beside you in a fight, too."

Champagne nodded, remarking dutifully, "I would have liked to have known him," before proceeding more hesitantly, "and yet I almost had the feeling Leo was more interested in this reconciliation between myself and Aimery for your *niece's* sake." There was an unspoken question in that statement.

"That could well be," Ibelin nodded again. "He hosted her after she

had been seized by pirates, and he conceived a deep, almost paternal affection for her. He showed great understanding for her feelings and did not press her to show herself in public, but he was very solicitous of her welfare, bringing many doctors and priests to counsel her."

"Then she suffered maltreatment from the pirates?" Champagne asked in genuine shock.

"She was not violated, no, but she was at Paradisi to recover from an ailment that still plagues her—and the trauma of being seized, for a time bound in the hold of a ship, watching a failed rescue attempt, and then the weeks of uncertainty—they all took their toll."

Champagne nodded in sympathy. "Isabella was outraged, as you can imagine! She was desperate for me to *do* something, but what was I supposed to do?"

"That, I assure you, is the way we all felt. Aimery suffered a foretaste of hell until Erik Andersen could report who the pirates were and where they were headed." Ibelin hesitated, but since the conversation had turned to Eschiva anyway, he decided this was as good a time as any to warn Champagne. "You face more hostility from Eschiva than from Aimery, by the way."

Champagne looked genuinely startled. "Why is that? I swear I have always been as gracious and kindly to her as any man could possibly be—"

"Except for ordering her husband dragged from her bed and thrown into a dungeon for a deed he did not do," Ibelin pointed out.

Champagne looked at his father-in-law perplexed. "Is that the way she sees it?"

"Eschiva is less political than either my lady or yours," Ibelin explained simply. "She rarely thinks in terms of kingdoms and politics. She is loyal to her husband, and she believes he was wronged. In her eyes, you were unjust, and she has said she could *never* forgive you."

Champagne flinched—but then, frowning slightly, he sank into his thoughts. He focused on the climbing road that zigzagged back and forth up the steep slope ahead of them. Finally he turned to Ibelin and asked, "So is there any point in this visit?"

"Certainly! Aimery and I persuaded her that she should receive you and at least hear you out. You will have to exert all your charm to overcome her enmity," Ibelin warned solemnly before adding with a smile, "But I daresay you are up to the task."

"I will certainly do my best!" Champagne assured him.

By the time they dismounted in the forecourt of St. Hilarion, Champagne was as agog as they had all been the first time they saw

the rocky mountain crest that housed the irregular and impregnable castle of St. Hilarion. “It might as well be an eagle’s nest!” Champagne exclaimed, looking about in awe and nearly dizzy at the view down to the coast.

“Eagles do indeed nest all over the place,” Ibelin answered, with a gesture toward the gnarled, wind-stunted trees around them in which many birds of prey made their homes.

“Those towers up there must give you a spectacular view!” Champagne admired.

“On a good day, they claim you can see all the way to Rhodes. It’s not true, of course, but it *feels* like it. We certainly can see any ships approaching from the West long before they reach us. It’s a wonder Isaac Comnenus was so surprised by your uncle’s fleet. People must have seen it approaching for a day before it actually got here. But then, they may have kept the information to themselves, seeing how little they liked Isaac. Fortunately for your uncle and us, Isaac preferred the luxury of the palace in Nicosia to the semi-wilderness up here.”

Champagne asked Ibelin to pause while he caught his breath. They had been climbing steadily ever since they left the outer ward, and it seemed like over two hundred steps. He let his eyes sweep along the northern coastline in wonder. “It is a beautiful place,” he admitted.

Ibelin nodded, and they continued, their men behind them.

In the courtyard of the upper castle banners were hanging from the windows, and these flapped and curled in the stiff breeze. The arms of Lusignan fluttered proudly from all the surrounding rooftops, while the household knights and officials stood on the steps up to the great hall. Champagne paused to straighten his surcoat and his hat and then advanced through the narrow space that opened for him, with Ibelin a pace behind. He nodded acknowledgment to the men he knew: Henri de Brie, Barlais, the Chenechés, Jubail, and Bethsan.

They passed out of the fading natural light of dusk into the artificial light of hundreds of torches and lamps. Here the women were gathered in their finery, along with the clerics. On the dais at the far end of the room stood Aimery and Eschiva. Aimery had opted for armor and a silk surcoat with the arms of Lusignan—quartered with the arms of Jerusalem. That was an affectation Guy had started (legitimately), but which Aimery had now retained (provocatively, in the circumstances, Ibelin thought). Eschiva, in contrast, was in full Greek splendor: a dress stiff with cords of braided gold and studded with jewels that glistened in the unsteady light of the torches and lamps. Neither was crowned, of course, but then nor was Henri. Although both men carried the title of “king,” neither had yet been

anointed. It was something that helped make this meeting possible.

Aimery solemnly descended the steps of the dais to meet Henri halfway down the hall. The two kings embraced, kissing each other in a gesture of public reconciliation. “Jerusalem, welcome to Cyprus!”

“An honor, Cyprus, an honor.”

Aimery turned and led Champagne up the dais steps and to Eschiva, standing immobile before the table.

Champagne bowed deeply before her and kissed her hand. “My lady! My lady wife, Queen Isabella, begged me to deliver a kiss from her.” Although Eschiva caught her breath and drew her head back slightly, Henri ignored her obvious reluctance and took a step forward to deliver a kiss on both of her cheeks. As he did so he whispered, “Please forgive me, dearest Eschiva. I did wrong to arrest your husband, but for the sake of our children let us be reconciled.”

Eschiva had not been expecting such a complete apology from Henri. She was genuinely flustered by it. She had prepared herself to be cold, inhospitable, disdainful, punishing. But how could she be, if he was so willing to admit he had been at fault?

Champagne drew back enough to smile directly into her eyes, his blue eyes pleading with her. “Please. At least let us focus on the present, the future. I long to meet your sons again. Ibelin tells me they are growing fast and are already showing signs of the Lusignan good looks.” Again Champagne had aimed well: Eschiva was inordinately proud of her three sons, and any flattery of them won her favor.

“Come, my lord king, join us at the table,” Aimery suggested, evidently unsure how Eschiva was reacting, and anxious not to prolong this moment in case her animosity toward Champagne still held the upper hand.

Champagne responded by bowing deeply to Eschiva and gesturing for her to precede him. She went around to the other side of the table and took her seat between the two kings. Maria Comnena sat beside her son-in-law, with her husband beside her, and Burgundia had been given the seat of honor on her father’s far side. Champagne gallantly kissed her hand as he passed her on the way to his own seat. His “Enchanté” made the twelve-year-old blush with pleasure.

Champagne turned to Aimery. “I’m quite serious,” he exclaimed, speaking across Eschiva but to her as well. “I’m most anxious to meet your sons—because, you see, they are the main reason I am here.”

Aimery raised his eyebrows, and Eschiva frowned slightly.

“Marriages, as we all know, are the best means of burying bad blood. Leo and Bohemond are just the most recent example of a breach healed by bonds of marriage. The great Christian capitals of

the East, Constantinople and Jerusalem, were united by my beloved mother-in-law's marriage to King Amalric." Champagne turned to smile at Maria Zoë. "So, you have three sons and I have three daughters; let us betroth them to one another."

"All of them?" Aimery asked, astonished.

"Exactly!" Champagne retorted with a smile, his eyes shifting from Aimery to Eschiva. He had taken her by surprise, he could sense that —she looked stunned—but it was hard to tell if she was also pleased or the reverse.

When Eschiva spoke it was to protest, "Your girls are still very little. The youngest, Philippa, is not yet a year old."

"And Guy is already a youth, I know," Champagne conceded, "but your middle son is not so very much older than my Alice, and your littlest, Hugh, is only months older than my Philippa. The reality is that children are fragile. We cannot know for sure if all our children will reach adulthood, and this alliance is too important to allow it to hang on the life of any single child. That is why I think we should commit not to specific betrothals, but rather to the principle of marriage between the eldest surviving son of the House of Lusignan and the eldest surviving daughter of the House of Champagne-Jerusalem." As he finished, Champagne cast his eyes around the table to assess the reception to his proposal. He saw fundamental consent with the idea from both Ibelin and the Dowager Queen. Indeed, even Aimery was nodding. Eschiva was the only one who looked uncertain.

Aimery seemed to sense the same hesitation, because with a significant glance to his wife, he announced that they would think about the proposal and speak among themselves. Then he gestured to the food being brought in, signaled for the squires to pour the wine, and changed the subject.

The detailed negotiations lasted almost a fortnight, with Eschiva insisting tenaciously that the daughters of Champagne bring Jaffa as their dowry. Her argument was that Richard of England had bestowed Jaffa on Geoffrey de Lusignan, who had turned all his claims in the Holy Land over to Aimery. Champagne resisted the idea for a long time, until Ibelin pointed out that a Lusignan stake in the Kingdom of Jerusalem would make it more likely that the kings of Cyprus would expend Cypriot resources to defend Jerusalem. Champagne saw the logic of that argument, and it was agreed.

The night before Champagne was to depart, the festivities lasted late into the night. The mood was very good, and Eschiva let Champagne take her briefly onto the dance floor. She was too weak to dance for long, but as he brought her back to the high table she was

exceptionally flushed, and Aimery bent over to brush a kiss on her forehead, remarking proudly, “You look like a young girl again.” He was only partially lying: she did look younger than she had in years. “It’s good that Champagne is leaving tomorrow, or I would have to fear he was seducing you,” he teased.

Eschiva shook her head. “Never, my love. But will you forgive me if I go to bed now? Before the end of the festivities? I’m feeling dizzy.”

“Of course! You’ve been holding up wonderfully these past weeks, but there’s no need to overdo it.” Aimery turned and looked around for someone to escort Eschiva. Philip d’Ibelin, who had been standing attentively behind the high table, came at once. “Bring the queen to her chamber; she needs to rest,” Aimery ordered.

Eschiva pushed herself to her feet, and Champagne at once jumped up. With the perceptiveness of a well-mannered nobleman he asked, “Is something wrong, my lady?”

“Nothing except that you have exhausted me, my lord,” Eschiva answered with a faint, yet contented smile. “That last dance. I think I overdid it a little—but I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. I’m just a touch dizzy.” Indeed, she was swaying slightly. Philip slipped his arm around her waist and half carried her off the dais into the solar.

Eschiva was hardly able to stand, and Philip called to another squire who happened to be there to come help him. They supported Eschiva on either side and together helped her up the stairs to her chamber. At the chamber door, Eschiva dismissed the strange squire and told Philip to help her to the bed.

“Should I send for Beatrice or one of your other ladies to help you undress?” Philip asked anxiously, feeling out of his depth in the bedroom alone.

“No, no. I don’t need to undress just yet. I’ll just rest a bit. Maybe I’ll go back down to the hall later, when I feel better.”

Although the words were reassuring, something about her demeanor made Philip hesitate. “Should I bring you something to drink?”

“No, no. I’ve had more than enough wine. Just lift my feet up onto the bed.” Eschiva was sitting on the bed, and as she spoke she laid her head back on the pillows. Philip dutifully lifted her feet up onto the bed, slipping off her shoes at the same time.

Eschiva smiled at him down the length of her body. “Have I ever told you what a good squire you are, Philip?”

“Who? Me?” Philip asked, astonished. “John’s the good—”

“Yes, John’s a good young man. I’m sure he’ll go far, but I’ve liked having you around me *more*. John was always so earnest, you know.

You make me laugh. Whatever happens, don't lose your sense of humor, Philip."

"Aunt Eschiva?" (Technically they were cousins, of course, but because of the age difference Philip had always called her "aunt" in private.) "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, Philip. Now hurry back so Aimery doesn't start worrying, but . . . "

"Yes?" Philip prompted, still uneasy.

"Your father. Tell your father—no, never mind. He knows."

"Knows what?"

"What he has meant to me. All my life. Long before Aimery and the children . . . "

"Aunt Eschiva . . . you sound very strange. . . . " Philip admitted.

"Nonsense. I'm happy. Very happy. Things have turned out so well. So much better than I ever dreamed. I don't really care about being a queen, you know, but it means so much to Aimery to be king after all those thankless years groveling at Guy's arrogant feet. And I like the thought of our children . . . I'm so glad that Champagne came. So glad we could be reconciled. Go. I need to rest." She patted Philip's hand in a gesture of both reassurance and dismissal, and he slipped out of the room.

By the time Aimery came to bed, Eschiva was in such a deep, peaceful sleep, with a smile on her lips, that he did not want to disturb her. It was just hours before he needed to rise and escort the King of Jerusalem to Limassol so he could sail back to Acre. A formal escort of barons and knights would accompany him, so Eschiva had no need to join them. It would be better if she slept in late or whiled the whole day in bed to recover from the strain of the past weeks. He closed the door gently behind him, and slept in the anteroom.

The following morning the two kings set off side by side on the journey to Limassol. There they took leave of one another, with a great show of affection that was no longer staged. Both men had found much to admire in the other, now that Guy was dead and both felt more secure in their own realms.

It was not until Aimery, Ibelin, and the others returned to St. Hilarion five days later that they learned that Queen Eschiva was dead. She had passed away peacefully in her sleep the night before Champagne departed.

Chapter Twenty-One
One Wrong Step

Paphos, Cyprus, September 1197

"You don't need to come if you don't want to," Maria Zoë assured her eldest son sympathetically. Today they were (at last) inaugurating the successful completion of the aqueduct with a festival in the main square of Paphos. Tests had been made and everything was functional, but the water had been temporarily blocked again to await this official opening. Today, in the presence of the Greek Bishop of Paphos, Ibelin, and all the leading (and most of the common) citizens of the city, the large central fountain (and others throughout the city) would be flooded with water. The Bishop would bless the fountain, and there would be street food, music, and dancing. At the banquet Balian and Maria Zoë would honor the Greek master builder and his team, who had successfully built a new channel that hooked up to intact remnants of the Roman aqueduct. The master was to be given a large silver pitcher, and each of his masons would receive a small silver cup.

The problem for John was that Ayyub/Antonis had completed his apprenticeship, and as a journeyman had obtained permission to marry. He had requested the hand of Father Andronikos' daughter Eirini and had received a positive answer.

When his mother addressed him, John was standing in the window niche, gazing out to sea with a wistful expression on his face. Now he pulled himself together and stepped down into the room. "I will come with you. This is one of Papa's greatest achievements in Paphos to date. I would not want anyone to think I did not honor him for it."

Maria Zoë touched John's arm gently in approval. John was now a head taller than she, having caught up with his father. He was still very slender, and his face was almost gaunt, but it was a man's face. John had turned eighteen this past May, and he was his father's right hand in everything.

Maria Zoë nodded that she was ready to go, and John opened the

door for her. They descended to the ward where Balian was marshaling their escort, with Meg already mounted on her flower-bedecked palfrey. At the sight of Maria Zoë and John, Balian called to the grooms to bring their horses, and in minutes they were all mounted and ready to depart. They crossed over the drawbridge and back into the town, which was bustling with subdued excitement. The harbor was more crowded than usual, and the crews of the ships were streaming from the port toward the center of town with the unique swagger of sailors freshly ashore. Carts, mules, and donkeys tethered to various buildings testified to the number of visitors, as people from the surrounding countryside flooded into the city to partake in the festivities.

A herald rode ahead of the Baron of Ibelin/Paphos and with short trumpet fanfares announced his approach. At the sound, people flocked to the side of the street and craned their necks to get a look at the Baron and his Comnena wife. There was no cheering, Ibelin noted, but he could sense no hostility, either. His eyes scanned the crowds looking for signs of trouble or resentment, but he found none. People appeared to be adjusting to Latin rule, and he supposed that (for at least today) they were mostly satisfied. Here and there people even waved to him. Bringing water back to the fountains was definitely a popular move, and well overdue. The public humiliation of the bath master who had assaulted his immigrant competitor had caused a small riot the previous year, and tensions between Greek and Latin, native and immigrant populations still simmered. But everyone could agree on the utility of functioning fountains. He hoped.

As they approached the large square on the site of the old Greek agora, the crowds thickened—and here, at last, men occasionally called out blessings or cheers. Ibelin could be fairly certain that most of the men wishing him well were newcomers, settlers from the Kingdom of Jerusalem, particularly from Nablus. Over the past year he had noted the unusual number of men from Nablus among the settlers; they appeared to have chosen Paphos, rather than Nicosia or Kyrenia, because they knew him and Maria Zoë.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Greek Bishop of Paphos had agreed to conduct the blessing was a good sign, too. The Bishop was flanked by scores of priests, all in their black vestments and long beards, which fluttered in the stiff westerly breeze coming off the Mediterranean. Ibelin had had word that the Pope had issued a papal bull this past winter naming a Latin Archbishop of Nicosia and suffragan bishops in Paphos, Limassol, and, surprisingly, Famagusta. While Ibelin welcomed the notion of Paphos becoming a bishop's seat, because it would bring additional wealth and prestige to the city, he was a little relieved that no Latin bishop had yet been named. This way he could

bow to the Greek bishop in a gesture of respect that would, hopefully, help ease the latent tensions even more.

At the edge of the square, Ibelin and his party dismounted, left the horses with the squires, and advanced to greet the Bishop of Paphos with humility. Ibelin, his lady, and Meg all bowed their heads to receive a blessing before going together to the edge of the fountain. As they waited, apparently in prayer, a flag was run up on the tower of the customs house overlooking the square. This was answered by a flag on the tower of the outer wall. The latter could be seen by the men controlling the aqueduct cistern. Within minutes water rushed down the slope to bubble up into the fountain with a satisfying gurgle, followed by splashing. The latter ignited a cheer from the crowd around the square that became so enthusiastic it drowned out the Bishop's blessings. People started pressing in, dipping their hands in the cool water or filling jars and cups with it. Everyone was talking at once and jostling one another good-naturedly.

Ibelin, his wife and children removed themselves from the fountain with the bishop to stand on the steps up to the customs house. The bishop nodded benevolently at the crowds, as youths started splashing one another to the accompaniment of loud shouts. "This is a good thing," the bishop assured Ibelin above the noise. Balian's passive Greek had improved enough for him to understand remarks like this, but he was still reluctant to speak in Greek. So he answered in French, and Maria Zoë stepped in to translate.

While his parents exchanged pleasantries with the bishop, John's eyes found Ayyub/Antonis in the crowd. Sure enough, Eirini was at his side. She was dressed in a pretty gown with bright red embroidery, and she had hooked her hand through his elbow to walk beside him. She was very modest—indeed, she wore a scarf over her head and neck. She kept her head down, too, rather than shaking her curls and throwing smiles at all the handsome youths as some of the other girls did. But she didn't look glum or miserable, either. Rather, she was flushed and cast frequent admiring glances at Ayyub/Antonis. They were the same glances that she had once directed at John.

"Could you excuse me a moment, my lord?" John addressed his father formally.

Ibelin nodded absently, and Maria Zoë cast John a questioning, almost warning, look, but he ignored her. He wove his way through the crowds, skirting the press of people still surrounding the fountain to where Ayyub/Antonis was chatting to several of his fellow masons.

"Antonis!" John called out to attract attention.

Antonis turned around, surprised. When he caught sight of John, his face broke into a wide smile. He had no idea that John was in love

with Eirini, and John knew that. Nor could John blame the Syrian immigrant for falling in love with the Cypriot maiden. Who wouldn't? What he couldn't understand was why Eirini had chosen Antonis over him.

As he joined the masons, John held out his hand to Antonis and congratulated him on successfully completing his apprenticeship.

"And my marriage! Eirini and I were married yesterday!" he announced, bursting with pride.

John was staggered to think it was already done—irrevocably and eternally. Not that he could have stopped it. He glanced sharply at Eirini, and she dropped her eyes, blushing bright red.

"Then I must congratulate the bride," John found himself saying smoothly, as he bent forward to touch his cheek to hers. It was self-inflicted torture, as he remembered the feel of her lips on his. How could she do this?

"I wanted to invite you and your lord father," Antonis was saying innocently, "but Father Andronikos convinced me we couldn't afford a feast worthy of a baron."

"My father, and indeed all of us, do not require extravagance," John countered, still feeling off balance and a little dizzy; "you should know that."

"Look! They're opening the casks of wine! Will you join us for a toast?" Antonis asked.

"Of course. I must drink to your good fortune and wish you many children," John agreed—although he didn't know where the words came from. Inwardly, out of pain, he wished them the opposite.

"Would you mind looking after Eirini while I fight my way through the crowd?" Antonis asked, with a smile so innocent it baffled John. Didn't he suspect anything?

John could only nod, however, and the next thing he knew Eirini was hanging on his elbow, while Antonis plunged into the crowd that had converged on the wagon with the wine casks. At first John couldn't bring himself to even look at her. He kept his eyes fixed on the crowd, watching Antonis' progress. Then it just burst out of him. "Why? Why did you marry him?"

"Because he asked me," Eirini answered bluntly.

"You mean you would have married *anyone*?" John demanded angrily, looking down at the first and only woman he had ever loved in his short life, anger smoldering in his breast.

"Not *any*one," Eirini answered firmly, "but Antonis is a good, honest man. He is hard-working and will go far. He is also very kind, and he

loves me. Is that not reason enough?"

"What about me?" John protested. "Are you saying I am not good or honest? Or do you doubt my love?"

Eirini would not meet his eye as she answered, but she spoke firmly, almost bitterly. "You are Latin, and you are a knight. You would never have married me."

John felt he had been kicked in the gut. She was right, of course.

"I do not want to dishonor my father," Eirini rubbed the message in. "I was foolish to lead you on, but I'm not a child anymore. I want to be a respectable woman with a husband, home, and family. You could never give that to me. Antonis will."

John had nothing to say to that. He swallowed and looked for Antonis. He didn't want to be with Eirini a moment longer. He just wanted to run away. But he couldn't. He had to wait for Antonis to return. Eirini was now gazing at him. "Are you angry with me?" she asked, sounding for the first time a little unsure of herself.

John didn't dare to look at her. He kept his eyes on Antonis, who had successfully purchased three cups of wine and was returning cautiously through the crowds, intent on not spilling any of the precious liquid. "No," John told Eirini, unsure if he was lying or not. "As you say, we are not children anymore," he added. Inwardly he wondered: Could only children love without thought of the consequences? Did you have to be a child to just fall in love without calculating costs and benefits and risks? He felt very sad and very old, and had to force himself to smile as Antonis, grinning, offered him a cup of red Cypriot wine.

John raised his cup. "To the bride and groom! May you have many happy years together and a house full of healthy children!" He put the cup to his lips and gulped down half at once. Then, with another forced smile, he raised the cup again in salute.

"And to you and your father for making this all possible!" Antonis answered sincerely, lifting his own cup.

John raised his cup to clink it with Antonis', and as he did so he noticed a commotion at the other side of the square. He frowned and craned his neck. "Something's going on." He gestured toward a rider who was forcing his way through the crowd, making for the Lord and Lady of Ibelin/Paphos. The rider wore Lusignan livery and his horse was caked in sweat and dust.

"Something's going on. Excuse me." John handed his near-empty cup back to Antonis. "I must find out what has happened."

John forced his way back through the crowd as rapidly as possible, but it wasn't easy. People kept getting in his way. By the time he'd

skirted the fountain, the rider had dismounted and gone down on one knee before his parents. They were both staring at him in obvious shock, while the Bishop of Paphos was crossing himself. Whatever news he'd brought, it was bad.

John pushed people aside to run the last few strides, pounding up the steps to his parents' side. Balian pulled him up the last step. "John! I need you to escort your mother to Acre at once. I'll come as soon as I can, but I need to regulate some things here first. Take her back to the castle to change and organize an escort of six knights. Take Sir Galvin and have him choose any other five knights he wants. Meanwhile, I'll find Andersen and have him get ready to put to sea immediately. *Haakon's Ghost* may not be as fast as the *Storm Bird*, but on this wind, she'll still get you to Acre faster than riding for Limassol and looking for another galley. Don't bother with horses. You'll have access to the royal stables."

"Yes, my lord," John replied without hesitation, but he couldn't help asking, "What's happened?"

"Henri de Champagne is dead. Some sort of bizarre accident. We don't know the details yet, but apparently he fell from a window to the courtyard and his death."

"Champagne?" John asked, incredulous, the images of him full of life, charm, and good spirits still vivid in his mind.

"I need to get to Bella as soon as possible," his mother told him.

"And I'm coming with you!" Meg declared resolutely.

Balian stepped back so John could take his mother's arm and escort her, and he didn't stop Meg from following. John elbowed his way through the crowds to their tethered horses. They did not speak. They did not need to. They all grasped what a horrible and unfair blow this was to Isabella. Just once did Maria Zoë exclaim: "God help me! She doesn't deserve this!"

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem, Mid-September 1197

Haakon's Ghost slipped into Acre as the wind died at dusk. The standards of Ibelin and Jerusalem were both flying from the masthead. The pilot met them off the outer sea wall. As the Norsemen manned the oars to enter the harbor cautiously, the pilot turned to sprint into the harbor. Imperiously, the pilot ordered one of the ships tied at the quay to clear a berth for the Dowager Queen's ship. By the time Maria Zoë, John, and Meg stepped ashore, horses were already waiting for

them along with a small contingent of royal knights. Although Maria Zoë could not remember any names, she recognized several of the young knights from Champagne. They had come out with their lord on the last great crusade and had served Isabella since her marriage to Henri. They looked shocked and somber.

Standing with his mother and sister on the quay as they prepared to mount up, John was disturbed by distant shouting, screaming, and crashing. He frowned and lifted his head to listen more closely, and Barry lifted his head and ears as well. As a knight led a horse forward for him, John swung himself into the saddle and picked up the reins, but immediately asked the knight, "What's going on? It sounds like you're under assault!"

"In a way we are," the royal knight answered grimly. "Ever since their victory over al-Adil last week, the Germans have become insufferable! They've been demanding better lodging and complaining about market prices. Now they've run amok down in the Jewish quarter and are plundering and looting."

John stared at the knight in incomprehension. "And you haven't been able to restore order?"

"How can we? There's only a score of us, and we need to stay close to the palace to protect the Queen."

"You can't just let foreign troops run amok in the heart of Acre!" John protested.

"Well, you try to stop them, puppy!" the man answered with a sneer and a contemptuous look at Barry. Then he spurred his horse to the head of the column. John clamped his jaw together and followed behind the others, but his gaze was drawn again and again toward the sounds of rioting coming from the northwest. Where was the watch? Where was the Constable? John realized uncomfortably that he hadn't a clue who Champagne had appointed Constable after driving Aimery out of the Kingdom five years ago.

He cantered to catch up with his mother and sister near the head of the column, Barry loping behind him. As he drew up beside them, he pointed in the direction of the noise. "Do you hear that? Apparently the German crusaders are helping themselves to the property of the Jews. Someone's got to stop them! The Jews are citizens, too. Besides, if they can take what they want from the Jews with impunity, they'll attack the Syrians and then the other burghers next."

Maria Zoë looked over her shoulder in the direction John was pointing, and nodded. "You're right. You'd better see what you can do."

"Me?" John asked, astonished.

“No one else seems to be concerned. Take your father’s knights and find out what’s happening.”

John drew a breath to protest, but then realized his mother was right. He was a knight, heir to Balian d’Ibelin, Lord of Paphos. His father’s knights would obey him. “I’ll see what I can do, my lady,” he answered his mother formally.

He set his jaw and his expression turned to one of grim determination. As he inwardly assumed his father’s role, he jumped down, put a lead on Barry, and turned the dog over to his sister. Then he remounted and rode back to his father’s knights.

As he drew up beside Sir Galvin, he pointed toward the noise and again explained the situation. Sir Galvin didn’t hesitate or question. He pulled his helmet off his pommel, set it on his head, and drew the strap tight. Then he drew his battle-ax from its leather case and weighed it in his right hand. Sir Sergios strung his bow and notched an arrow. The other four knights drew their swords.

They set out across town, following the sound of the disturbance. By now the sun had set and the streets were cast in shadow, but unlike most evenings in Acre there were no taverns spilling tables into the squares. There were no hawkers on the corners offering pre-prepared food, wine, or ale. The storefronts were closed and barred from the inside, and shutters were closed over windows.

The sounds of rioting grew steadily louder and nearer, and soon the smell of smoke reached them, too, making the horses skittish. Quite abruptly, as they followed a jog in the street, they came upon a large crowd of people cowering together in a cul-de-sac. They were keening and lamenting, some of the women tearing their hair and some of the men shaking their fists. Opposite them, a half-dozen soldiers were smashing open windows and doors or already dragging valuables into the street to stuff into their tunics. John felt a shudder run down his spine. Then he spurred his reluctant horse forward and clattered in among the looters, his sword drawn, to underline his shouted orders to desist.

The sight of an armed knight made the men drop what they were doing and fall back into the nearest alleyway. Delighted by this easy success, John and his men followed in pursuit. Unfortunately, the alley led to a larger square around the synagogue. The latter was already smoldering, although it had not truly caught fire. Here the number of men engaged in the looting numbered in the scores. John sat back and hauled his stallion to a halt. “I think they’re too many for us!” he shouted at Sir Galvin. “We need reinforcements,” John concluded.

Sir Galvin grunted in reply as he, too, pulled his stallion to a stop.

He added, “I’ll go rouse the f***ing garrison! The lazy bastards!”

“I’ll try to bring the royal guard. One of you go back to *Haakon’s Ghost* for help.” John answered and asked his horse for a canter.

At the palace, the guard opened the gates for him without question, but John shouted down at them, “What the hell are you doing? There are hundreds of German soldiers looting and trying to burn down the synagogue!”

“Our orders are to protect the palace. You can’t stop the Germans anyway. They’re barbarians!”

“Where are the German nobles?” John answered, while his horse, responding to the restlessness of his rider, kept turning and scrambling on the cobbles.

“They’re staying in the Archbishop’s palace,” the sergeant-in-command answered, gesturing to the large building diagonally across the street.

John swung his horse around and trotted across to the Archbishop’s palace, snuggled up beside the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. Here the sergeants at the gate did not immediately recognize the Ibelin arms on his surcoat; it had grown too dark to distinguish color. They blocked his way belligerently.

John was getting increasingly desperate. He shouted at them, more forcefully than ever before in his life: “I’m John d’Ibelin, brother of the Queen, and I demand to see Conrad of Hildesheim immediately!”

John knew who to ask for, because the Imperial chancellor and commander of the German crusaders was the same man who had crowned Aimery King of Cyprus only two weeks earlier.

The guards caved in before John’s imperious manner, and he found himself in the courtyard of the Archbishop’s palace. He jumped down from his borrowed horse and took a moment to orient himself. He had been here only once or twice before, but fortunately for formal occasions, which meant he knew his way to the Archbishop’s great hall. It helped that torches were lit along the inside of the arcade, and also up the stairs to the second floor. John took the stairs two at a time, conscious that the synagogue could be ablaze by now. Certainly the damage and destruction continued with each minute.

He burst into the Archbishop’s great hall to find it already crowded with men milling about and, to his relief, the Archbishops of Acre and Hildesheim sat together on the dais. They were apparently in earnest discussion with a number of noblemen. John pushed his way through the seething crowds in the lower hall, unable to understand what was agitating the many occupants, because they were all speaking German. He sprang onto the dais, provoking a tardy response from a young

knight in Hildesheim's service. The latter tried to put himself between John and the men at the table, but John shoved him aside so forcefully that two German noblemen sprang to their feet with their hands on their hilts.

"My lord of Hildesheim!" John called out to the Imperial Chancellor from half a dozen feet away. "Your men are plundering and looting in the streets of Acre as if they were in Damascus! And you have nothing better to do than sit and drink?" The outrage in John's voice rang to the vaulted ceiling and reverberated there.

The German noblemen at once drew their swords and shouted back at John, while behind him a general uproar erupted. The Archbishop of Acre, however, leaned back in his chair with an odd smile on his face, and the Imperial Chancellor gestured for silence, telling the noblemen to sheath their swords.

The level of noise dropped but did not fully die away. The Imperial Chancellor spoke into the lull, "It's young John d'Ibelin, is it not?" He spoke in Latin.

"Yes, my lord," John answered in the same tongue, because it was their only common language.

"And you presume to give orders to me? The Imperial Chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire?" he asked with raised eyebrows.

"My sister the Queen," John started deliberately. He was breathing heavily, but he had a grip on himself. He answered slowly and clearly, speaking so every man in the hall could hear him, "… is in grief and mourning. The *Dowager Queen of Jerusalem*, therefore, tasked me with restoring order. And that I *will* do, even if it means riding down and butchering your men," John bluffed. "I would *prefer*, however, if you brought your men to order."

Behind him he heard men muttering "*Juden"* and "*Schweine,"* but he ignored them and focused on the Imperial Chancellor. Hildesheim might be a bishop, but he was a worldly bishop—and one who knew how to wield a mace.

"What makes you so certain you can stop thousands of fighting men from obtaining what they believe is their just reward, young man?"

"My faith in God, my lord Bishop," John answered as forcefully as he could, gulping air into his lungs to try to calm his racing pulse. "He knows that what your men do is an offense against His people—the people he was born to—and His Holy Gospel, for which He gave His sacred blood. Even now my men are calling out the watch. If you do not take action, we will." John's heart was pounding furiously in his breast. God help me! He pleaded silently. God help me!

"Is this not what I have been saying for the last hour?" the

Archbishop of Acre spoke up, leaning forward and hissing to his fellow bishop: “You know it is the right thing to do.”

“My men won a great victory over the Saracens, and what have they got for it? Nothing. No loot. No gold. Nothing.”

“They have received the remission of sins past,” the Archbishop of Acre countered, “but *not*, I must stress, absolution for what they are doing *now*. The sins they are committing here in the Holy Land against innocent people will take them all to hell, regardless of what they did to al-Adil’s army!”

Hildesheim looked over at Acre with raised eyebrows for a moment, but then he pulled his feet under him and stood. He started distributing orders in German. The noblemen around him nodded, turned toward the hall, and started calling to their men. Abruptly all the men in the hall appeared to be scrambling to find their helmets and gauntlets. John felt himself quaking. If they were going to join their men in the looting, he—no, Acre—was utterly lost.

As if reading his mind, Hildesheim clapped him on the shoulder and remarked, “You win, boy. I’ve ordered my knights to rein in their men and move them out of Acre. We’ll set up camp outside the walls—and then look for a Saracen city to sack.”

John turned toward the Archbishop of Acre in amazement as Hildesheim swept past him, calling to someone to bring him his helmet and arms. He wasn’t yet sure if he should believe Hildesheim or not.

The Archbishop of Acre had once upon a time been a priest at the Church of St. George in Lydda. He had known John’s uncle and father. He smiled at John with nearly paternal pride as he remarked, “Well done, young man. You are truly an Ibelin.”

Acre, Late September 1197

Ralph of Tiberius pounced on Balian before he had even dismounted. “Ibelin! Thank God you’ve made it.” He grabbed Balian’s bridle and held his horse for him as he dropped down onto the cobbles of the courtyard. Then in a low voice Ralph murmured, “Isabella must marry immediately! We need a king to take command of the Germans and confront al-Adil. We can’t afford to take her grief into account. Too much is at stake.”

Balian gave the young man a reproachful look and noted, “I’ve only just arrived, Tiberius. Let me at least speak to my wife and her

daughter."

A groom emerged to take his horse, and Balian turned over the reins. He stepped back to tell his squires to see to his baggage, and then started immediately up the steps. Tiberius, however, clung to his side and continued speaking in a low, urgent voice. "My lord, don't mistake me as callous. I have the deepest sympathy for the Queen. No one would be gentler with her, yet more forceful with our enemies."

Balian stopped in mid-stride to turn and stare at the young nobleman. "Did you just suggest what I think you did? That you would be a suitable consort for Queen Isabella?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm a prince of Galilee," Ralph answered.

"A land we lost in 1187," Ibelin retorted briskly, before adding more wearily, "along with Ibelin and Ramla. I know. There's no shame in being landless, but the Queen needs a consort who is—"

The Lord of Caesarea, coming down the stairs, recognized Balian just as he came abreast of him, and at once stopped to grab him by the elbow. "Ibelin! Thank God! We need to call the High Court together."

"Of course," Balian answered with a glance at Tiberius. "But first I wish to see my lady and my stepdaughter the Queen."

Balian continued up the stairs, but Caesarea turned to flank him on his left, while Tiberius still clung to his right side. "Al-Adil has laid siege to Jaffa," Caesarea reported, pacing himself to Balian.

"And the Germans damn near burned down the synagogue," Ralph of Tiberius chimed in. "If your son John hadn't put a sword up the Bishop of Hildesheim's butt—"

"What?" Balian gasped, turning on Ralph in shock.

"Just a figure of speech, my lord," Ralph excused himself. "The German troops were running riot, helping themselves to whatever they wanted—and not just in the Jewish quarter—while the German knights and barons sat around ignoring it all. John stormed in and somehow convinced them not only to intervene, but to move their troops outside the city."

Balian was astonished—and very pleased.

"Jaffa's the bigger problem," Caesarea countered doggedly, with a frown at Tiberius. "Al-Adil still has some fifty thousand troops in the field, and the last we heard Barlais had sailed down to Jaffa with his wife and God knows what else, but certainly *not* troops. It was his pleas for help that forced Champagne to hire the Italian mercenaries. He was trying to address them from the balcony when it gave way under him."

Ibelin frowned. Aimery's selection of Barlais as the man to take

control of Jaffa for the Lusignans had been dictated by the fact that Barlais had been Geoffrey's man and seemed to feel he was *entitled* to act as the Lusignans' lieutenant there. Aimery had also pointed out that Barlais had made more than enough enemies on Cyprus, and was better occupied elsewhere. Still, Balian wasn't surprised to find he was no match for al-Adil. Barlais was a sergeant—no matter what title you dressed him up in.

"Can't we send the Germans down to relieve Jaffa?" Ibelin asked Caesarea.

"*Who* are you suggesting should send them down?"

"The Queen."

This answer produced dead silence. Ibelin looked from one man to the other, and they both shook their heads mutely while not meeting his eye. Not a good sign.

Before they could say another word, however, the Archbishop of Nazareth emerged out of a door they were passing. He caught sight of Ibelin and exclaimed, "Thank God you're here, Ibelin! You need to summon the High Court at once! We have many urgent decisions to make! May I send out the summons?"

"Of course," Ibelin answered, surprised no summons had been issued already.

The Archbishop turned as if to take immediate action, but then stopped himself and turned back to lecture Ibelin (rather pompously, Balian thought): "The Kingdom has rarely been in a more precarious situation, my lord. You have no idea how close we came to losing the battle to al-Adil—right here outside our very gates." He gestured dramatically in the general direction of the Nazareth Gate. "The Germans would all have run away. It was the citizens of Acre, rallying to Champagne late in the day, who enabled us to hold their attacks and finally scatter them with a last charge."

"The Chancellor speaks the truth," Hugh of Tiberius spoke up hotly. He had come out of apparently nowhere to stand beside his brother. "The value of these German troops is far less than what we hoped."

"They're only good for terrorizing civilians!" his brother Ralph scoffed.

Ibelin looked from one to the other in dismay and then tried to continue, but now all three men kept pace with him, and he was next waylaid by the Lord of Arsur. "Ibelin! At last! We need to summon the High Court."

"Yes, I just told the Chancellor to issue the summons," Ibelin assured him, adding in a tone tinged with exasperation, "I expected the summons to go out before now."

“On whose orders?” Arsur asked, astonished. “You are the Queen’s closest male relative. Or your son John, I suppose. . . .”

“No matter. It’s done now. Although it looks as if most of the tenants-in-chief are already here,” Ibelin noted with a nod to Pagan of Haifa, who had joined the crowd of men around him.

“Sidon hasn’t shown up, and Jaffa is now held by Lusignan. We’re also missing half the bishops,” Haifa at once joined the conversation.

“What about the rear-tenants?”

“I haven’t taken a count, but we could summon them to the Cathedral at noon tomorrow and see who shows up.”

Ibelin nodded again, still somewhat astonished to find all these men awaiting his orders. While it was true he was arguably the most senior baron in the Kingdom, he had not imagined that the others would be so passive in his absence. No doubt the unexpectedness of Champagne’s death had left them dazed and confused. No one had been prepared for a young king in the best of health to be suddenly taken from them.

He reached the entrance to the royal apartments. The heavy double doors were closed, and two sergeants stood in front of them, helmets partially hiding their faces behind wide nose guards. They stood with their legs apart and their hands on their hilts. They clearly had orders to admit no one and were determined to follow those orders.

Balian turned toward the door, and the men around him fell back respectfully.

“I’m Balian d’Ibelin,” Balian told the guards simply. He did not even raise his voice.

The guards reacted smartly and promptly. One turned and opened the door, shoving it open and then stepping back and aside to allow Ibelin to pass. The other remained alertly in place, eyeing the men who had swarmed around Ibelin, ready to block them if they tried to follow. None of them did.

Balian stepped into the royal anteroom, and the door clunked shut behind him. The anteroom of the Queen’s apartment was familiar. He had spent many hours there during the English King’s sojourn in the Holy Land. The Plantagenet had housed his bride and sister in this palace, and Maria Zoë had spent a great deal of time with both ladies; he had often waited for her here. Then it had been bustling and cramped; now it was abandoned and empty. Carpets had been spread over the marble floors to dampen sounds, and tapestries had been hung on the walls for presumably the same reason. They were dark tapestries whose motifs he did not readily grasp, yet all were concerned with death, darkness, and grief.

He advanced through this room to the next, a private solar in which the Queen and her ladies usually read, spun, sewed, and conversed in privacy. It was a domain from which most men were prohibited. Again, it had been spread with carpets and hung with tapestries, making the room stuffy and hot. But here a sudden flutter of motion near the empty fireplace drew his attention.

"Papa!" Meg exclaimed as she jumped up, tossing her book aside to run to him. She was dressed all in black with black ribbons in her hair. "I'm so glad you've come!" she told him as she threw her arms around him. Then without taking a breath, she pulled him toward a marble bench they could sit on side by side. "It's been absolutely terrible!" Meg announced. "Isabella tried to kill herself before we arrived. Her ladies found her before she could bleed to death and bound up her wrists, but she'd barely recovered from that when she took a double dose of sleeping medicine—she says by accident, but Mother doesn't believe it—and she threw up all night long! Now she's refusing to eat, saying she can't face it, that she'll throw it all up. She's lost ten pounds at least, and she looks terrible!" Meg concluded.

"Looks are not all that matters, Dove," Balian reminded his younger daughter.

Meg rolled her eyes. "I *know* that!" she protested. Taking a deep breath, she met her father's eyes and declared forcefully, "… but they say something about us, too. Isabella is naturally beautiful; if she looks terrible, it's a reflection of the state of her soul."

"Hmm," Balian answered, impressed despite himself, but unprepared to admit that to his fifteen-year-old daughter. "So where are your mother and brother now?"

"I'm not sure where John is. He's been very busy. The very day we arrived, the Germans were rioting and looting down in the lower town. John tracked down the Bishop of Hildesheim and shamed him into taking action. I wish I'd been there! The Archbishop of Acre came to tell Mama all about it, praising John to the heavens, but John said he was quaking in his boots because he was bluffing about being able to ride the Germans down with his—meaning your—men. Meanwhile, Sir Galvin had roused the garrison watch, and Sir Sergios had fetched Andersen and his crew—who were spoiling for a fight, of course. Together with the Norsemen, they already had the Germans on the run even before Hildesheim and the German barons arrived."

"Good man!" Balian exclaimed. "I must find some way to reward him for that. And your mother? Where is she?"

Meg sighed. "She's in there with Isabella," she gestured with her head to the peaked door leading to the inner chamber.

"Is she all right?"

"You know Mama. She doesn't always let you see what she's feeling."

Balian smiled at that, then bent and kissed his daughter on her forehead. He stood to continue through the portal to the inner chamber.

"Papa?"

"Yes?"

"Isabella has to marry again, doesn't she?"

"That, or abdicate in favor of her daughter Maria."

"Oh!" Meg obviously hadn't thought of that. "But—But Maria's only five!"

"A regent would have to be appointed for her until she married. Traditionally, *constitutionally*," he improved his own phraseology, "the regent is a minor monarch's closest male relative. In Maria's case her closest male relative is her father's younger brother, Boniface of Montferrat. However, because she derives her right to the crown from her mother rather than her father, the High Court might rule that her mother's closest male relative takes precedence. In that case, the regent would be Isabella's half-brother, your brother John."

"John? But he's only eighteen."

"Only? That's more than old enough. The regency for a prince ends at age fifteen, remember, and from what you've just told me, John has already exerted authority and defended the interests of the Kingdom." Meg continued to look skeptical, but Balian told her, "Think about it, Dove. I must go to your mother and Isabella."

He advanced toward the door to the Queen's bedroom with the same determination and trepidation with which he led a charge against the Saracens. He knew he had no choice, and he felt nearly as helpless. He was in the hands of God.

Entering the bedchamber, he noticed that the air turned sour and smelly. It wasn't anything in particular, just a mixture of medicine, stale food, stale wine, maybe a whiff of vomit (perhaps that was just his imagination after Meg's comments), and sweat. Two women Balian only vaguely remembered jumped up in shock and alarm at the sight of a man entering the inner chamber, then recognized him. They dipped their knees and bowed their heads with a murmured "my lord" as they backed away.

Maria Zoë, dressed in black from her veils to her shoes, was sitting beside the bed, apparently reading aloud to Isabella. The latter was lying propped up on pillows inside the large box bed, which was hung with black curtains. Maria Zoë's voice faltered as she registered the intrusion; then her eyes met Balian's and her face relaxed. Something

similar to a smile flitted across her face without reaching her lips. He advanced to her and took her hand as he turned to look down on Isabella.

Meg had not been exaggerating: Isabella did indeed look terrible. Her face was puffy and splotched with red as if she'd been crying all day and all night ever since the accident. The skin around her eyes was so swollen and red that it made her eyes seem small and pig-like. Her lips were chapped, but she had several pimples on her chin and beside her nose as well. Her hair was greasy and hung in limp strands around her face.

"My lady Queen," he greeted her formally.

"Don't call me that!" Isabella wailed, lifting herself up and reaching out her arms to him. "Hold me, Uncle Balian! Like you used to do when I was a little girl!"

Balian had no idea what he had been expecting, but certainly not this plea for comfort. It quite overwhelmed him, and he felt his throat tighten and tears sting his eyes as he knelt with one knee on the edge of the bed and pulled Isabella into his arms. They were both transported back to when Isabella had been a little girl of eight, dragged kicking and screaming from her home to live with her future in-laws at the order of the King. She had been imprisoned for three years in Kerak on the edge of Sinai, prohibited from even visiting her mother and stepfather. Balian and Maria Zoë had risked the wrath of the Lord of Kerak to go to her several times, and once Balian had gone alone. It had been during that visit that he had confessed his helplessness to rescue her from Kerak.

"I'm just as helpless as I was when you were at Kerak," Balian found himself confessing again as he held Isabella in his arms. She had been so little and skinny then. Now her figure was womanly and soft, but she clung to him in the same way. "I can't bring Henri back, any more than I could rescue you from Oultrejourdain and his witchlike wife," he told her, his throat so tight with unshed tears that it was audibly strained.

"I just want to die!" Isabella wailed, tears flooding over her face. "I don't want to live without Henri. He was everything to me. He made life worth living. It's not the same as when Conrad died. We quarreled so much. He didn't really love me. Henri loved me, Uncle Balian. He really did!"

"I know he did, Bella," Balian assured her, squeezing her tighter for an instant. "He *still* loves you—from beyond the grave. It must break his heart to see you like this."

"What am I going to do?" Isabella asked, pulling back a little, so that Balian held her only loosely with his hands on her shoulders.

“Mama says I have to go on living. That I am still Queen of Jerusalem. That I have no choice but to serve my kingdom.”

Balian glanced at his wife, and then turned back to his stepdaughter. “You certainly have to go on living,” he told her firmly. “If you take your own life, you damn your soul for all eternity, and so will be separated from Henri for eternity. He will certainly go to Heaven. You must know that?” he asked gently but reproachfully.

Isabella looked down and nodded.

Balian let go of her and backed off the bed, but remained standing beside it so he could hold her hand. “As for being Queen, if you truly want, you could abdicate and retire to a convent.”

Isabella looked up at him hopefully. “Truly?”

“Of course,” Balian assured her, despite the unhappy restlessness he could hear and sense behind him; Maria Zoë clearly did not approve of this advice. “But, of course, you would not be allowed to keep your children with you. You would have to turn all four of your little girls over to the care of the High Court.”

Isabella gasped, and then hiccupped eloquently. “That’s not fair!” she protested.

“Bella,” Balian reminded her gently, “a woman who renounces the world for God renounces all ties to her earthly family, and that includes her children. You know that.”

“But if I remain Queen, I’ll be forced to marry again!” Isabella protested. “How can I marry again, when I know I will never love another man? Sharing another man’s bed would be abhorrent to me! Consummation would be rape!”

This much Balian had expected, and he nodded calmly as he stroked the back of Isabella’s hand with his thumb. His calm acceptance of her outburst confused her, and she felt compelled to add, “I mean it, Uncle Balian. I could not bear to be intimate with another man after Henri. I would loathe him—and myself—for it!”

Balian nodded again and assured her, “I believe you, Bella, and I know how you feel. I know I could never share intimacies with another woman, if God should choose to take your mother from me before He calls me to Him.”

“So what is left for me to do? I can’t abdicate and retire to a convent without losing my children, and I can’t remain Queen without losing my sanity by being forced to take another man to my bed.”

Balian drew a deep breath. “The High Court will insist on a marriage, but they’re hardly going to stand around in your bedchamber to enforce consummation.”

"No, but what man would marry me for a crown and then risk losing that crown for lack of consummation?" Isabella shot back, making Balian smile inwardly. Isabella sometimes acted like she was all emotion, but underneath was a sharp brain.

To Isabella he simply weighed his head from side to side, trying to win time. He wasn't sure she was ready to really consider alternatives yet. He chose subterfuge. "Well, there are men like Humphrey who abhor sexual contact with women."

"Poor Humphrey!" Isabella exclaimed, and hiccupped again. Then she looked up sharply. "You don't mean . . . ? Surely the High Court—you told me they would *never* accept Humphrey."

Balian sidestepped the question about the High Court by reporting truthfully, "Humphrey has taken vows as a monk. He has joined a community of reclusive Greek Orthodox monks and vowed both chastity and poverty. But there are other men . . . like him," Balian noted cautiously.

Isabella did not seem taken by the idea. He risked going further, and shrugged slightly as he remarked in what he hoped was still a purely speculative tone, "Or, alternatively, a man who already *has* a crown would be less obsessed with securing a second."

"Kings don't exactly grow on trees," Isabella countered snidely. "And a man used to ruling will have little concern for *my* feelings. I'm not naive. I listened very closely to what Queens Joanna and Berengaria had to say about their marriages!"

"It's true. Kings are used to getting their own way, but if he felt as you did . . . "

Isabella frowned and sat up straighter, drawing her hand out of Balian's. "What do you mean, 'feels like I do?' How can anyone feel like I do?"

"You're right, Bella. No one could feel exactly as you do. You have suffered an exceptional blow. Henri was young and strong and healthy, and he had survived the battle with al-Adil only a week earlier. You must have seen God's grace in that and felt secure in His love for both of you. Nor is this like Conrad's assassination, because Conrad had made many enemies, and he had always lived on a knife's edge."

Isabella was frowning ever more intensely, and her body was taut. "You have someone in mind, don't you, Uncle Balian? You've already decided for me." She sounded resentful.

"No, Bella," he answered steadily. "I have not decided for you, nor can I. The choice will be the High Court's."

"Certainly!" Isabella spat out indignantly. "And whose voice will be

loudest and strongest there? You know they'll do whatever you suggest."

"No, Bella, it's not that simple," Balian countered calmly. "Furthermore, I can assure you that none of us on the High Court would impose our wishes upon you. We may suggest candidates to you, but it will be your choice. The Church, if nothing else, insists on consent—as you well know. You cannot be forced into a marriage against your wishes."

"Who?" Isabella demanded.

Balian looked over his shoulder at Maria Zoë, because he had not had a chance to discuss this with her yet. He would have much preferred to consult her before sharing his idea with Isabella.

Maria Zoë got to her feet and joined him at the side of the bed. She said nothing, just looked up at him expectantly.

"I've spoken to no one about this—least of all the prospective bridegroom," Balian told his wife and stepdaughter. "And there's no need to discuss this immediately. I only—"

"*I want to know who you are thinking about*!" Isabella told her stepfather sternly and precisely, her lips clamped together.

"Balian didn't do such a bad job choosing last time, sweetheart," Maria Zoë reminded her daughter, leaning forward to stroke Isabella's arm as she spoke, while looking again at Balian with raised eyebrows.

"I was thinking of a man who is also in mourning. A man grieving for the woman he loved, the mother of his children, and yet a man who is already king and so would not marry you for a crown, but rather for sake of defending your kingdom *for you*. A man who has proven his worth on the battlefield many times, but is also wise in counsel—"

"Aimery?" Isabella gasped out. "Eschiva's Aimery?"

She sounded so shocked that Balian didn't dare speak. He nodded mutely.

"It would be like betraying Eschiva!"

"If it is just a formal marriage, as you want, without any intimacies, then how is that a betrayal of Eschiva?" Maria Zoë asked gently.

Isabella looked at her mother, then back at her stepfather. Her expression was unreadable, but Balian took it as a good sign that she was not shouting at him hysterically or telling him to get out of her sight.

"Sweetheart, nothing has to be decided right now," Maria Zoë suggested reasonably. "Why don't you let your ladies take you down to the baths, and then you could go visit your little girls, while I see

about a proper meal. We can have a quiet family dinner with Meg and John to celebrate your stepfather's arrival. Then maybe you can get a good night's rest and we can talk again in the morning. What do you think?"

Isabella looked at her mother tensely, her mind clearly sorting through a variety of possible answers before she took a deep breath and agreed. "Yes, Mama. I think you're right. It's time I left this bed, washed, and dressed. Don't think I have agreed to this marriage!" she warned her parents sharply, but then continued in a calmer voice, "Still, I can't continue hiding from the future, can I? I have to face it, and it's easier to do that if I'm not a stinking wreck. Henri always wanted me to look and act like a queen. . . ."

"Because you are, Bella," Maria Zoë reminded her softly, her hand still on Isabella's arm.

Isabella looked at her mother as if she wanted to protest, but then she nodded. "Yes, I will concede that much: I would rather be queen than give up my little girls. I've neglected them, haven't I?"

"No," Maria Zoë answered with a tired but relieved smile. "You needed time to grieve, and it would have done your children no good to see you in this state. When you go to them, you need to be strong enough to comfort *them*."

Isabella drew a deep breath. It meant a great deal that her mother did not reproach her for her behavior—because deep inside, she felt guilty about it. She had been self-indulgent these past ten days, and she knew it.

Then she looked up at her stepfather. He was still looking concerned and uneasy. "You see, Uncle Balian? You've managed to drag me back from the precipice after all. How do you do it?"

"I didn't, Bella," Balian told her, reaching out to pull her into his arms again. "You did it all on your own."

Chapter Twenty-Two
The Last Kingdom

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem, December 1197

THE ROYAL WEDDING WAS SET FOR the Saturday before the first Sunday in Advent, so that the feast would not be constrained by fasting. The fact that the German crusaders had marched north and taken control of first Sidon and now—if reports were to be believed—Beirut, meant that the subjects of the Queen of Jerusalem were (gratefully) among themselves. They had come to love their young Queen and wanted to give her a "proper" wedding, particularly since none of her three earlier weddings had been celebrated in great style. Her first wedding had taken place in a castle under siege when she was just eleven years old. The second had been hastily concluded in a tent during the bitter siege of Acre. Her third marriage, to Henri de Champagne, had been conducted in even more haste, barely a week after the assassination of her second husband. Not once had Isabella been celebrated by her subjects.

Now the commune of Acre buried their many rivalries and came together to plan festivities to mark the marriage of their Queen. To the wonder of the rest of the population, Pisans, Venetians, and Genoese worked hand in hand, while the guild masters and other communities —whether Syrian, Armenian, Latin, or Jew—likewise joined forces to plan a worthy celebration. Furthermore, all the various communities opened their coffers and engaged in a frenzy of preparations to make this event a testimony to their loyalty, their increasing prosperity, and their determination to survive as a kingdom. The King was dead; long live the King!

The streets had been scrubbed so clean that the stray dogs had moved out of town in search of food. The drunks and beggars had been rounded up and temporarily incarcerated in the city jail. The prostitutes were sternly ordered to wear "respectable" clothes or risk arrest. The churches had been decked in lavender and late-blooming roses, and from terce onwards their bells pealed in joy. Long banners of white stitched with crosses of gold hung from the windows of the

houses, flapping and twisting in the breeze, while the arms of Jerusalem fluttered from all the rooftops.

Half an hour before midday, the large galley that had been lying offshore ran out her oars and started to maneuver towards the harbor entrance. Inside the harbor, the ships ran up their bunting and began to blow their foghorns in a cacophonous greeting.

At the same time, the gates of the royal palace opened and a long procession emerged. It was led by the exiled canons of the Holy Sepulcher, followed by the clerics of every church in the city—except the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, where the Archbishop and all his minions were preparing the wedding Mass. Behind the churchmen came knights in gleaming armor on brightly caparisoned stallions, both men and mounts bearing the arms of Jerusalem on surcoats and trappers. Next came the barons of the High Court, flanked by their ladies, ending with the Lord of Ibelin/Paphos and the Dowager Queen of Jerusalem. Immediately behind them, on a mare cleaned and curried to an almost perfect white and tacked with gold accoutrements, came Queen Isabella. For the first time in eighty days, she had set aside the black of mourning, and was dressed in purple and gold. Behind her came her half-brother John and half-sister Meg, followed by the rear-tenants, aldermen, and leaders of the commune of Acre.

Meanwhile, in the harbor, the blue galley trimmed with yellow had gone alongside the quay, the standard of Lusignan flapping from the masthead. The gangway was run out, and on deck the passengers waited, immobile and hushed. As the head of the procession emerged from beside the Court of Chain, a noticeable ripple of motion seized the men aboard the ship. As the clerics moved along the quay to make way for the rest of the procession, a man with a bushy mane of graying hair emerged from the aft accommodations of the galley. He was dressed in bright-blue robes trimmed with gold, and wore a closed crown on his head. He moved slowly to the end of the gangway and waited until the Queen of Jerusalem approached the edge of the quay. He then stepped up onto the gangway and waited again.

The Queen drew up and dismounted, causing all her escort to do the same. Her brother John stepped forward to hold her mare, and her sister Meg stepped behind her to carry her train. Slowly and deliberately the Queen advanced toward the gangway.

At last the King of Cyprus crossed the gap between sea and land, stepping down onto the quay to meet the Queen of Jerusalem. Neither bowed nor bent a knee. As equals they met, and as equals they kissed. The kisses were cool and formal, as if they were perfect strangers. Then the Queen turned to face her city and subjects, while the King

took her elbow.

Together they walked along the prepared route between cheering crowds to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. They walked slowly, nodding and waving to the crowds. Isabella managed to smile and wave, particularly for a youth sitting astride the railing of a balcony as he gestured frantically to get her attention and for a troop of excited little girls, who waved wildly at her and giggled in delight when she waved back. King Aimery nodded and lifted his hand now and again, but acted as if the cheers were all for the Queen.

They mounted the steps to the Cathedral and passed into a candlelit nave, the organ humming and the canons chanting. They proceeded directly up the central aisle with the barons, knights, and aldermen behind them. They were met at the screens by the Archbishop of Acre, and here the King and Queen halted. Behind them, the procession entered and spread out in the nave, along with many others who had tagged along, until the cathedral was filled to overflowing.

It took a long time, but eventually a degree of imperfect quiet settled on the crowd. The canons finished their chant. The organ fell silent. The Archbishop raised his hands and blessed the King and Queen. He reached out and took Isabella's left hand and Aimery's right. He asked first Aimery and then Isabella if they were prepared to take the other in holy matrimony. They each answered in the affirmative, Aimery in a firm voice heard to the back of the nave, Isabella softly but without hesitation. The Archbishop placed Isabella's hand in Aimery's. The King of Cyprus drew a ring from his baby finger and prepared to slip it on Isabella's ring finger. When he noticed she was still wearing Champagne's wedding ring, he hesitated. He glanced up at her, but she kept her eyes down demurely. He pushed his ring over her knuckle and closed his hand firmly around hers for a moment. Then he turned to face the Archbishop again.

The Archbishop blessed them, then led them through the screens. Aimery took Isabella by her elbow and together they followed the Archbishop between the canons, who had started to sing again. In front of the high altar, satin-covered cushions waited for them. They knelt down to take communion, while the spectators remained behind in the nave.

Following the wedding Mass, Aimery and Isabella exited by the main portal into the street, to be met by a large crowd that broke into cheers of "Hip, hip, hooray!" and "Long live the King and Queen." Again Isabella waved graciously and Aimery waved with noticeable restraint. After a suitable time, some of Isabella's knights slipped past to clear a way for her to the royal palace and the waiting feast.

The wedding meal lasted over five hours, with numerous courses

both savory and sweet. It was interspersed with entertainment from jesters, acrobats, troubadours, dancing monkeys in Saracen costumes, dwarfs dressed like Roman soldiers, and more. Each community in the city had selected their favorite entertainer for the occasion. During the feast, wedding gifts were also presented to the Queen. Each guild and commune strove to outdo their rivals by the beauty, craftsmanship, and expense of their offering.

Isabella seemed particularly moved when the Jewish community presented her with a carved ivory book cover that depicted scenes from the Old Testament. She asked the Talmudic scholar who had been selected to present the gift to come onto the dais. As he knelt before her, she thanked him earnestly, saying that she was touched by such generosity when the Jewish community had suffered so much damage at the hands of the German crusaders. The man, in his skullcap and long beard, bowed repeatedly as he assured her that the Jewish community was loyal to her and her house, and appreciated the protection her family had always provided to them. He glanced toward her brother John as he spoke. King Aimery at this point leaned forward and announced in a deep and clearly audible voice that the Jews could be assured of the protection of the House of Lusignan as well.

Later, after the last course of meringue roses and marzipan doves had been decimated, there was dancing. The Lord of Ibelin danced with the Dowager Queen, and many other barons likewise danced with their ladies. King Aimery was seen to address his wife, but she shook her head, and the royal couple remained on the dais as spectators. As the pace of the music increased, more and more of the older couples retreated, leaving the sweep of the great hall, cleared now of tables and benches, to the youth. John d'Ibelin led his sister Meg, but he was soon displaced by Hugh of Tiberius, Walter (the younger) of Caesarea, and a host of other young noblemen. Meg d'Ibelin was very pretty, lively, and (based on the peals of laughter that came from whatever part of the room she was in) witty and entertaining. She was also the sister of the ruling Queen, which made her a brilliant match.

After three hours of dancing, with the city long since embraced by the early winter night, King Aimery rose and offered his hand to Queen Isabella. She stood, and Aimery indicated the door off the back of the dais. Isabella turned and started toward it. At once the guests, now well inebriated, began clapping, chanting, and singing. Many, particularly the young men, surged toward the dais to follow the couple to their bedchamber and partake in the bedding ritual. They were stopped short by the knights of Ibelin, who came seemingly out of nowhere and lined the front of the dais, preventing anyone from

mounting it.

There was some protesting, but as the Queen's household knights reinforced the Ibelin knights, the crowd recognized they had been checkmated. With some grumbling, they accepted that they would have to find their entertainment elsewhere. As neither wine nor food was being replenished anymore, the crowd started to disperse. The wedding feast was over.

Aimery knew his way around the royal palace of Acre, but he let Isabella lead. They had spoken very little, beyond the marriage vows and other necessities, and Aimery still could not see beyond Isabella's public façade to what she was really feeling. As they entered the Queen's anteroom, Philip and Fulk, Aimery's new squire (Dick had been knighted the year before), rose to meet them.

Isabella was surprised to see Philip; she smiled at him. "Philip! When did you arrive?"

"I came with my lord of Lusignan," the squire answered with a glance at his lord.

"You're still my brother," Isabella told him, and stepped forward to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

As Isabella drew back from a visibly embarrassed Philip, Aimery told his wife, "I'll give you a few minutes to prepare yourself," and gestured with his head toward the door leading deeper into her apartments.

Isabella nodded and continued to the bedchamber, where her ladies awaited her.

When the door closed behind her, Aimery removed his crown and handed it to Philip, who reverently placed it on one of the small tables. Then Philip and Fulk helped Aimery out of his wedding robes and undergarments, right down to his silk shirt. This Aimery opted to keep on. "Is there water?" he asked.

"There's water, wine, bread, dried fruits, and oranges in the bedchamber, my lord," Philip answered.

Aimery nodded and looked about the room. Something was different about it from the days when Eschiva had served the English Queen, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

"It was hung with black tapestries, my lord," Philip explained, interpreting Aimery's look almost correctly. "We managed to get them all down, but didn't have time to find substitutes."

"The Queen is still in mourning—no matter what she wears or the color of her tapestries."

Philip nodded solemnly, and Aimery glanced toward the inside

door, wondering whether it was too soon. He decided to wait a little longer, and gave Philip instructions to pack his crown in its leather case and stow it in a chest in his own suite of rooms at the other end of the corridor. “One of you should sleep here,” he ordered, revising his instructions to: “Philip, as Isabella’s brother, you’d better be the one to stay here. Fulk can sleep on the pallet in my chamber.”

Both squires nodded, and Aimery glanced again toward the door nervously. He shook his head, and a strand of his long hair fell into his face. He ordered Philip to bring a comb.

Eventually one of Isabella’s ladies appeared in the doorway and announced that the Queen was ready to receive her husband. Aimery nodded to his squires, dismissing Fulk to retire and ordering Philip to remain where he was. He then proceeded through the open door and across the day room to the bedchamber beyond. As he entered the latter, the other lady curtsied deeply to him before withdrawing, closing the door behind her.

Aimery found himself in a richly decorated chamber dominated by a large box bed with heavy velvet hangings. The room was lit only by one glass oil lamp hanging from the ceiling and a candle by the bed. Isabella was already in bed, her hair loose about her head, but the sheets drawn up over her body modestly. Only her neck and head were visible, propped up on the pillows.

Aimery walked to the side of the bed and sat down on the edge.

“Thank you for sending the revelers away,” Isabella opened.

“Actually, it was your step-father’s idea,” Aimery admitted.

Isabella smiled faintly. “Dear Uncle Balian. I thought it might have been, since his men moved forward first, but you approved it. I appreciate that.”

“Look, Isabella, I’m not here to humiliate or conquer you. I understand that you do not want any intimacies. For the High Court, your servants, and your subjects, I think it best that I spend the night inside this room, but I am prepared to sleep on the floor if you insist. Or, if you would be so kind, I will join you in bed but, on my word of honor, I will not force myself upon you.”

“Thank you. I—I would not have agreed to this marriage if I had not believed you would respect my wishes. Yet, I—I want you to fully understand: I still love Henri.” Although she spoke almost defiantly as she gazed at him, her lips were trembling and tears were shimmering in her eyes.

Aimery’s heart went out to her. He would have liked to stroke the side of her cheek with the back of his hand. She had been brittle all day, and she’d been bound to break sooner or later. He was thankful

that she had made it through the wedding and the feast without breaking down. He would have liked to take her in his arms as he would have one of his daughters, but he realized that any move to touch her would be misinterpreted. So he looked away from her and, staring at the candle, announced in a low and heavy voice, “And I still love Eschiva.”

Isabella flinched, but Aimery didn’t notice. His eyes were still focused on the candle rather than Isabella. “I think I’ve loved her longer than I even realized. Even in the early years, when I cheated on her with any woman who fired my loins, it never detracted from my love for her.”

“That’s a terribly male thing to say,” Isabella told him bluntly. Aimery looked away from the candle to try to judge if she was bitter or reproachful, and Isabella smiled faintly at him. “I’ve been married three times before this, Aimery. I know a little about men.”

“Fair enough,” Aimery conceded—“but what I *wanted* to say is that my love for Eschiva grew with each year, each setback, each crisis.” His eyes shifted back to the candle as he spoke in a voice heavy with memories. “Throughout that year in a Saracen dungeon following Hattin, it was the thought of Eschiva that kept me from going mad. Yet it was only after I went to Cyprus that I came to *rely* on her in a way I had not imagined possible.” He paused and then admitted out loud for the first time, “She was the rock on which I built my kingdom —and she was gone before I could put a crown upon her head. I cannot tell you how much that hurts me to this day.”

The pain in his voice reached Isabella through the darkness. She leaned forward and touched her fingers to his cheek so lightly that he could barely feel it. “I’m sorry, Aimery. For you and Eschiva both.”

Aimery snapped his head around, and their eyes met. They were both on the brink of tears and they just gazed at one another. Then Isabella patted the bed beside her. “Come under the covers, Aimery, before you catch cold.”

Aimery hesitated, but then he went around the bed, lifted the covers, and slipped in to sit beside, but still inches away from, Isabella. “Thank you.”

“Why are you here, Aimery?” Isabella asked. “I don’t mean in bed, I mean in Acre. Why did you accept this burden of a grieving widow, four frightened little girls, and a threatened kingdom, when you could have just stayed on Cyprus with your own family and a secure kingdom?”

“That’s a fair question,” Aimery admitted. “I didn’t jump at the offer —in case Balian didn’t tell you.”

Isabella shook her head. “He didn’t tell me any details, just that you had agreed to my conditions.”

“I made him wait three days for my answer—and knowing how persuasive he can be, I wouldn’t let him talk to me during that time. I spent a lot of time at Eschiva’s grave, or just talking to her in my mind. I spoke to my confessor, and even asked my son Guy and Burgundia what they would think of such an extraordinary development. It was Burgundia who surprised me most. Her face lit up and she exclaimed, “Oh! Mama would have been so pleased!” He paused, because the memory was unmanning him. Tears were threatening to spill out of his eyes as he struggled to explain. “And that’s the point,” he continued, swallowing down his pain. “Eschiva never wanted anything for herself. She only wanted me to be successful and happy. She would have wanted me to be King of Jerusalem—not because she wanted Henri dead or you to be widowed. Don’t think that—”

Isabella reached out to calm him. “I know that. Eschiva loved me like a sister and only wanted the best for me. I *know*.”

“But she *hated* my brother Guy,” Aimery confessed. “She always resented that he, unworthy as he was, had been made a king and dared to look down on me. She *hated* that.” Suddenly he could hold his emotions in check no longer. He found himself sobbing helplessly at the memory of his former humiliations—and the irony that he was now King of Jerusalem but Eschiva was not with him to triumph.

Isabella opened her arms and pulled her husband to her breast. She held him and brushed her hands gently over his rough, graying hair as he shook with sobs. She did not speak, just held him until he had calmed himself.

That night they slept chastely in each other’s arms, yet both found comfort and peace that neither had expected.

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem, December 1197

“Father!” Aimery greeted Balian with open arms.

“Spare me!” Balian answered. “My impudent daughter Meg is going to get her wish for a beardless bridegroom, simply because I can’t *stand* the thought of yet another son-in-law who is older than I am.”

Aimery laughed heartily and gestured toward a table in the open doors giving access to a balcony.

“You *do* know,” Balian remarked, eyeing the open doors

suspiciously, “that it was the railing of the balcony in the next room that gave way, sending Champagne to his death?”

“Yes, I know. Just one wrong step . . . But we’re safe here. Come, sit down. I have a lot to discuss with the First Baron of my realm.”

“You seem to be in remarkably good spirits,” Balian noted with a penetrating sidelong glance. Aimery looked refreshed and energized as he had not since Eschiva’s death.

“Indeed,” Aimery agreed. “Surely you know that a young bride is the fountain of youth?”

“Hmm,” Balian answered ambiguously. After all, he had been the one to convey Isabella’s condition that the marriage be completely formal and unconsummated.

“You don’t have to look at me like that. I have not broken my word, as your lady wife will be able to attest after she’s seen Isabella. Nevertheless, Isabella and I are going to get along very well. We have already agreed on a number of things.”

“That is very encouraging,” Balian noted cautiously and a little warily.

“First of all,” Aimery announced happily, “I don’t know why Champagne was so reluctant for a coronation. It’s past time Isabella was crowned and anointed. She’s been Queen of Jerusalem since her sister died eight years ago—and had we crowned her then, my brother would not have found it so easy to bend England’s ear. Conrad would certainly have insisted on a coronation, but Champagne’s reluctance has denied Isabella her anointing these past five years, quite unnecessarily. I intend to set that straight, and will order that the Patriarch prepare a coronation for us both shortly after the turn of the year.”

Balian nodded approval.

“Second—something you and I have talked about before—we need to pull together everyone’s memories of the laws of Jerusalem and codify them, or at least record them before we forget.”

Again, Balian nodded.

“Third, Isabella is very concerned about these German crusaders, who appear to take no account of her interests or those of her subjects. She does not trust them, and she fears they may do more harm than good. They failed to relieve Jaffa, and now it has fallen to al-Adil. What we’re hearing is that they have plundered and slighted Beirut to the point where, reports say, it is no longer habitable. That’s not in anyone’s interest.”

Balian sighed.

Aimery continued, “I need a Constable who can take command of Jerusalem’s fighting forces and face down Hildesheim and his German barons.”

“Did you have someone in mind?”

“Yes: you.”

That took Balian by surprise. He started and then stared at Aimery with eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“But, of course, if you prefer to return to Cyprus as my lieutenant there, then I imagine I could find someone else. . . .”

Balian snapped for air, at a loss for words—but then he pulled himself together and replied forcefully, “I would indeed prefer to return to Cyprus, and I would be honored to serve as your lieutenant there.”

“Good. That’s settled, then.” Aimery smiled, indicating he had expected this response, before continuing, “So that still leaves the issue of a Constable for Jerusalem.”

“You know that Ralph of Tiberius was a rival for your position as husband to Isabella and King of Jerusalem?” Balian asked cautiously. He had bought the support of the Tiberius brothers for Aimery by agreeing to marry Meg to Hugh. To Aimery he stressed, “Ralph fought very well at Hattin, and both he and Hugh, I understand, distinguished themselves in this recent battle against al-Adil. You might think seriously about naming Ralph Constable as a means to cement his loyalty to you.”

“You *do* remember why Champagne arrested me, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Well, it would be the same with me and Tiberius: I would never completely trust him. I want a Constable that I trust 150 per cent.” He paused and waited for Balian’s somewhat reluctant nod before adding, “I was thinking of your son John.”

“John?” Balian could not believe his ears.

“He’s stood up to Hildesheim once already,” Aimery pointed out.

“John’s mature beyond his years. He’s got a good head on his shoulders. He’s brave, but not foolhardy.” Balian listed John’s virtues readily, but then hesitated and added, “And he’s only eighteen.”

“Baldwin was fifteen at Montgisard,” Aimery countered. “And I’m told Henry Plantagenet defeated his rival King Stephen at fourteen.”

Balian nodded absently. Hadn’t he told Meg only weeks ago that John was old enough to be regent? But that was different, because the title of regent was based strictly on blood ties. He reminded Aimery: “Kings automatically command loyalty; Constables need to earn it.”

“Fair enough, but it’s not as if I were a feeble old man or a minor child. I expect to command my own armies in any major conflict. I need a Constable for the working days, not for the crises. John is the Queen’s closest male blood relative. Who else should hold my horse at the coronation?”

Balian nodded again, and then with a smile he conceded, “Then so be it. I am grateful to you for recognizing John despite his youth.”

“*He* may not be so grateful,” Aimery quipped. “Such prominence and responsibility will cut his youth short.” Aimery was only half jesting.

“His youth was taken from him by Hattin,” Balian countered, and then caught his breath.

“Yes?” Aimery prompted.

“If you take John from me,” Balian opened, “then I want Philip back.”

“I thought you might,” Aimery admitted. “He’s half Greek already anyway, and apparently Champagne had no less than four body squires, all of whom are idle and in need of employment. Sons of barons, of course.”

Balian nodded. “Good. Was there anything else?”

“Just one thing.”

Balian waited.

Aimery became deadly serious. “You could have advised Isabella to abdicate in favor of her daughter, confident that you would have been named regent of Jerusalem. Weren’t you tempted?”

“Not really.”

Aimery raised his eyebrows.

“We reap what we sow. I surrendered Jerusalem for forty thousand Christian lives, and Ibelin for fifteen thousand more. So I have no right to claim territory. Furthermore, I owe those people a livelihood. We can offer them that on Cyprus.”

“In short, you chose Cyprus over Jerusalem.”

Balian smiled faintly. “I chose Cyprus over *Acre*. If we *had* Jerusalem—and Ibelin, I might have made a different choice.”

Aimery nodded in understanding. Part of him, too, preferred Nicosia to Acre, but the temptation to wear his brother’s crown had been too great in the end. “So Cyprus will be your kingdom, then. The last kingdom.”

“The last kingdom,” Balian corrected, “is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Paphos, Kingdom of Cyprus, Epiphany 1198

They'd left Acre on a cold northerly and it had been a rough, wet crossing, but as they approached Paphos harbor the wind died away and milder air enveloped them. Within a half-hour the wind had backed around to the south, and although it was only a gentle breeze, it was enough to carry them through the harbor entrance. As they cleared the breakwater and the full harbor came into view, they were startled to find lanterns burning from the mastheads and on the decks of all the ships at anchor and along the quay. Not just that, but a snake of flickering light marked a procession making its way out of the city to the harbor. The chanting of the monks leading the procession reached them across the water as Ibelin, his wife, and his two youngest children stood on the foredeck of *Haakon's Ghost*.

"What is it?" Balian asked Maria Zoë.

"I don't know. It must be a local custom," she answered.

Balian turned around and signaled to Erik Andersen. "Don't take her to the quay just yet. Let's wait and see what's going on and what happens next."

Andersen ordered the helmsman to head the ship into the wind and then drop the sail, so that the snecka just drifted.

The procession was carrying an icon surrounded by candles on a litter. Acolytes swinging silver incense burners flanked the litter; the bishop and a dozen priests preceded it while the people of Paphos followed, dressed in their best. Eventually the procession reached the harbor, and the litter was set down on the edge of the quay. The crowd spread out around the litter and a respectful silence fell. The bishop held aloft a large wooden cross—and then, to Balian's astonishment, he flung it into the water with all his might.

Instantly, several young men launched themselves from the bows of the anchored ships and started swimming furiously toward the cross, in an evident competition to get to it first. From the shore and the ships, people cheered and encouraged their favorites. One woman's voice calling "Vasili! Vasili!" was particularly clear. As the swimmers converged on the floating cross, the excitement grew. There was some wild splashing, and then one young man held the cross above his head and the crowd cheered.

The victor swam with the cross to the quay, and the bishop reached down to take the cross from his outstretched hand. Others lay belly down on the quay to help the swimmer climb up the side and stand,

dripping wet, beside the litter with the icon. A blanket was offered the swimmer, along with blessings from the bishop.

Singing broke out again, but now it was spontaneous and uncoordinated. Some of the men appeared to have brought wine with them and started to nip at it and pass it to their friends. The bishop turned and the litter with the icon started its journey back toward the cathedral, with many but not all the people falling in behind.

Ibelin nodded to Andersen that they could proceed, and the captain ordered the oars run out. They went alongside just as the last of the procession disappeared between the buildings lining the quay, but there were still a large number of people milling about peacefully on the quay.

The Ibelin family went ashore and began to walk the short distance to the fortress, but a woman, recognizing the baron and his family, blocked their way and gestured emphatically toward the city as she spoke in a flood of words too fast for Balian. “What’s she saying?” he asked.

Both Maria Zoë and Philip answered. “She’s telling us to hurry so we can catch up with the procession.”

“Do you think we should?” Balian asked Maria Zoë.

“Yes, let’s see what this is.”

They changed direction and picked up their pace in order to catch up with the end of the procession. They soon found themselves winding their way through Paphos past open doors displaying house icons, all lit by candles. At the head of the procession, the bishop blessed each icon and the usually elderly woman tending each as he passed by. Nuts, dried fruit, and wine were offered to the people following in the bishop’s wake. With each house they passed, the mood seemed to become less solemn and more joyous.

They must have tagged along for a quarter-hour or more before someone noticed and recognized Ibelin and his wife. Suddenly the names “Ibelin” and “Comnena” were being repeated up the length of the procession, like an echo that got ever fainter—until it started coming back the other way.

“*Ela! Ela!* Come! Come!” the voices said, and hands grabbed Balian’s and Philip’s arms, gesturing toward the front. Ahead of them people stood back to make way, and they were drawn forward through the length of the procession toward the front.

There was no question of refusing or resisting, but Balian was baffled by what appeared to be unmitigated goodwill. This wasn’t the passive acceptance of last year, nor was it the support of the immigrants. The people here were almost all Greek, and they were

smiling and nodding. He caught sight of Ayyub/Antonis with his wife and her family around him. Father Andronikos was nodding and smiling as if he could take credit for everything. Meanwhile, more and more women reached out to touch Maria Zoë's dress and murmur blessings for her as well.

As they reached the head of the column, the bishop broke into a wide smile and pulled Balian into his arms to kiss him on both cheeks. He exclaimed in Greek, in a loud voice that carried far: "My son! We thought you had abandoned us to return to your homeland, but you have returned to us! What a wonderful, additional reason to rejoice on this Holy Day!"

Maria Zoë caught her husband's hand and squeezed it. "I think we have come home," she whispered.

Balian d'Ibelin died in an unknown place on an unknown date of unknown causes. His grave no longer exists or has not been found. He was survived by his wife Maria Comnena, who died in 1217, and his four children. The House of Ibelin was to provide regents for both Jerusalem and Cyprus, seneschals and constables and queens, as well as scholars, jurists, and patrons of the arts. It was the most powerful family in Outremer for the next two centuries, yet never challenged the Crown.

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Thank you!

Helena P. Schrader

Historical Notes

First a word about the setting of this novel, as many readers may be surprised at how sophisticated, cosmopolitan and civilized the late twelfth century appears in this book:

- Although the bulk of the population in the Holy Land was still Christian at this time, the native Orthodox population spoke Arabic and used Arabic names; immigrants spoke their native languages and a smattering of Arabic. Second- and third-generation immigrants were bilingual, speaking both French, the language of the elite and administration, and Arabic, the language of the bazaars and the poor.

- The Holy Land under the Franks was an important crossroads of civilization. This resulted in considerable technological innovation and progress. Examples of this are: 1) wall fireplaces with chimneys. Although not known in the Arab world, the introduction of wall fireplaces and chimneys in Frankish homes predates their widespread use in Western Europe; 2) extensive use of glass in windows; 3) running fountains; 4) sewage systems that relied on water to flush out refuse.

Turning to specific historical events:

- Henri de Champagne ordered the arrest of Aimery de Lusignan, Constable of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, because he spoke up in defense of the Pisan community. Champagne suspected the Pisans of being in a plot with Aimery's brother Guy to depose him. According to the *Old French Continuation of William of Tyre*, Aimery was released because the grandmasters of the militant orders "and the barons of the Kingdom" went to Champagne and "upbraided him for having arrested the Constable. . . ." The text does not make clear that the issue here was a constitutional one, but the subsequent rebellion of the barons of Jerusalem against the Hohenstaufen kings hinges on precisely the issue that no member of the High Court could be arrested without an order by his peers (the High Court)—i.e., not by the King alone. I felt it was important to introduce this significant constitutional issue here.

- As I note in the introduction, there is no evidence that John d'Ibelin was squire to Aimery de Lusignan, but such a close relationship would help explain the otherwise surprising fact that King Aimery appointed John Constable of Jerusalem when still only eighteen or nineteen years old.

- In the Jerusalem Trilogy, Balian d'Ibelin was given a fictional younger brother Henri. He was invented when I wrote my first (unpublished) novel set in the Kingdom of Cyprus during the baronial revolt against Friedrich II. At the time, I was already trying to speculate on how the Ibelins became established on Cyprus, and hypothesized a younger son or younger brother who came to Cyprus with Guy, despite the hostility of Balian to Guy. Now that I've refined my interpretation of what happened, this fictional younger brother is no longer necessary.

- However, continued research turned up the fascinating fact that Balian had a nephew, the son of his maternal half-sister (whether Ermengard or Stephanie is not recorded) and her husband (first name unknown) de Brie. The Bries were powerful on Cyprus in the next generation. Hence the Henri d'Ibelin of the Jerusalem Trilogy has been reborn in this book as Henri de Brie, a nephew (rather than a brother) of Balian.

- In the Jerusalem Trilogy, I changed the name of Balian's brother Baldwin to Barisan to avoid confusion with Baldwin IV, the Leper King. However, as King Baldwin is not a character in this story, here I have used Balian's brother's real name, Baldwin.

- Due to confusion about when Aimery and Eschiva married and the dates of their children's births, and to avoid confusing name duplications, I used the name "Hugh" for their eldest child in my Jerusalem Trilogy, but have corrected that in this book to Guy. Hugh was not born until September 1195. On the other hand, to avoid the duplication of the name John, I have renamed Aimery and Eschiva's second son "Aimery."

- Despite the commonly quoted excerpt from the *Chronicle of Ernoul* that suggests Guy de Lusignan arrived in Cyprus in late 1192 to find a peaceful but depopulated island, there is substantial evidence that the revolt against the Templars continued throughout Guy's very short rule and into Aimery's reign as well. The Christian sources note that the Templars were driven from the island, and that the mightiest and wealthiest militant Order in Christendom *did not think they had the strength to hold it*—incredibly strong evidence that the revolt was very serious

indeed. Even Ernoul's account implies that the male population was decimated—otherwise the new settlers would not have been urged to marry the widows. Most important, the Cypriot chronicler St. Neophytos talks of an extended period of violence, bloodshed, and disorder.

- Neither the exact date nor the cause of Guy de Lusignan's death are known. George Hill, in *A History of Cyprus*, *Volume 2: The Frankish Period*, claims Guy died "suddenly" in April 1194. The more reliable Peter Edbury says in *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades* that Guy died "at about the end of 1194" without venturing to suggest a cause. La Monte speaks only of "1194." I chose a date that suited the story line. As for the cause of death, since any violent death—whether assassination or accident—is more likely to have been recorded, we can assume that Guy died of an illness. For dramatic purposes, I have chosen to make it a slow, painful death. The symptoms described here are compatible with stomach cancer. Opium was widely available in the crusader states.

- Neophytos is a historical figure, later sanctified, who wrote an important chronicle of the period. His account alleges terrible oppression by Isaac Comnenus, and claims that the island was depopulated and impoverished before the Franks came. He also rails against the Franks, however, accusing them of further oppression. In fact, he systematically accuses all rulers, including Manuel I Comnenus, of poor governance, making it hard to know if one really was better or worse than the others. St. Neophytos is known to have received visitors, and was revered in his own time. He also visited Palestine and Jerusalem before it fell to the Saracens.

- A conflict between the Latin Church and the Crown of Cyprus about tithes in the early thirteenth century makes it clear that the Greek Church was initially allowed to retain the tithes from their traditional lands—and that Ibelin's sons, notably Philip, supported the Greek—not the Latin—Church.

- Humphrey de Toron is said to have gone with Guy to Cyprus, and he was apparently dead before Aimery married the woman he still considered his wife, Isabella of Jerusalem. The date and circumstances of his death are not recorded. The notion of his joining a monastery is my own invention.

- Bizarre as it may seem, the incident of a Greek pirate named "Canaqui" (Kanakes in Greek) kidnapping Eschiva "and her

children" is a recorded fact. The date of the incident is, however, unstated, and although at least one source says it was after Aimery was king, we know that Eschiva died before he was crowned. I have chosen, therefore, to place the incident in the winter of 1195-1196. It is also recorded that she was seized from "Paradhisi," on the coast. The *Latin Continuation of William of Tyre* explicitly states she had been "ill" and had gone to Paradhisi for a change of air—i.e., to recuperate. The nature of her illness is unrecorded.

- The rescue attempt by Magnussen is entirely fictional, but I thought it a fitting end for my Norse crusader.

- It is recorded in the Continuations of William of Tyre that Leo of Armenia secured the release of Eschiva and her children because of his "love" for her father, but it is not explained how he knew Baldwin d'Ibelin. We do know, however, that after abdicating his titles and turning his son and lands over to Balian in 1186, Baldwin d'Ibelin went to Antioch, a neighbor and, at that time, ally of Armenia. As a fighting man in search of new opportunities, the Armenian struggle against overwhelming odds might well have attracted Baldwin, and an early death in Armenia would explain why he was never heard from again in the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

- Aimery came to the Armenian port of Corycos to collect his wife and children, accompanied by "the best men in his kingdom" to bring his family home. It is reported that he was about to dine with Leo of Armenia when the captain of his fleet warned that if he did not sail at once, he would "stay longer than intended." He sailed just before a terrible storm and made it safely to Kyrenia.

- The Archbishops of Trani and Brindisi delivered the "royal regalia" to Aimery in "April or May 1196," according to Peter Edbury, who suggests that Aimery styled himself King from this time forward. Documentation from the period is very scarce.

- The visit of Champagne to Cyprus and the betrothal of his three daughters to Aimery's three sons is historical fact. It is sometimes mistakenly dated in 1194, but at that time Champagne did not yet have three daughters. Late 1196 or the first half of 1197 are the only possible dates for a triple betrothal. I've chosen November 1196 for the narrative of the story.

- Eschiva died of unknown causes before September 1197. As she was still a comparatively young woman (in her thirties), and

there is no mention of an accident, death in childbed, or foul play, I believe she died of an illness—something supported by the Chronicles, which say that at the time of her kidnapping, she was in Paradhisi to recover from an illness. I have chosen to give her the symptoms of anemia, which can be fatal if not treated, and suggest that her captivity contributed to her weakness and so to her death.

- The "German crusade" led by the Imperial Chancellor, Conrad Bishop of Hildesheim, in cooperation with the forces of Jerusalem, defeated an invasion allegedly seventy thousand strong led by Saladin's brother al-Adil. The battle was nearly a defeat, and was saved by the commoners, who rallied to King Henri and held firm against a final Saracen assault.

- Henri de Champagne either stepped backwards out of a window or the balcony of a window collapsed under him on September 10, 1197. He died from the fall.

- Shortly after Champagne's death, Jaffa (which was held for Aimery de Lusignan by Barlais) fell to al-Adil.

- The German crusaders in 1197 reportedly behaved very badly while in Acre, throwing people out of their homes and plundering. Champagne called his nobles together and some recommended an assault on the Germans, but instead an unnamed "wise" German convinced the Germans to leave Acre and camp outside the town. This incident occurred *before* Champagne's death, but I chose to place it afterwards so that John could play a role in ending the incident.

- There are two literary justifications for giving John a role. First, Aimery named John Constable of Jerusalem just months later, while he was still only eighteen. I think it reasonable that he had done something that impressed the Lusignan with his capabilities. Second, roughly thirty years later, the commune of Acre proved tenaciously loyal to John, defying the Holy Roman Emperor to support him. An incident such as this, where John defended the rights of the citizens of Acre—especially against the Germans—makes a logical prelude to later events. Combined, these reasons made it convenient to portray John as a responsible and effective leader supporting the people of Acre, as a means of explaining his subsequent career. By giving John a role, I also had an excuse to include a real historical incident that would otherwise not have fit into the scheme of the novel. There is, however, no historical evidence that John d'Ibelin was in any

way involved in this episode.

- Sometime in the fall of 1197 or early 1198, the German crusaders recaptured the coast between Acre and Tripoli, notably the city of Beirut, which was found—and left—in a ruinous state.

- Aimery de Lusignan was chosen as Isabella's fourth husband. He came to Acre in "the autumn of 1197," when Isabella and Aimery were married. They were crowned in January 1198.

- There is no record of who Aimery designated as his lieutenant on Cyprus after he went to Jerusalem. Thus, while there is no evidence it was Balian d'Ibelin, it remains possible that, were he still alive, he could have been appointed, particularly in light of Maria Comnena's value as a representative of the still popular and legitimate Imperial Byzantine royal family.

- The date, place, and cause of Balian's death are unknown. To my knowledge, neither his nor Maria's grave has been found.

Glossary

Abaya: a black garment, worn by Islamic women, that completely covers the head and body in a single, flowing, unfitted fashion so that no contours or limbs can be seen. It leaves only the face, but not the neck, visible and is often supplemented with a mask or "veil" that covers the face, leaving only a slit for the eyes between the top of the abaya (which covers the forehead) and the mask or veil across the lower half of the face.

Aketon: a padded and quilted garment, usually of linen, worn under or instead of chain mail.

Aventail: a flap of chain mail, attached to the coif, that could be secured by a leather thong to the brow band to cover the lower part of the face.

Bailli: a governor or appointed official of the Crown, but also the elected head of one of the independent commercial "communes" of the Pisans, Venetians, or Genoese.

Battlement: a low wall built on the roof of a tower or other building in a castle, fortified manor, or church, with alternating higher segments for sheltering behind and lower segments for shooting from.

Buss: a large combination oared and sailed vessel that derived from Norse cargo (not raiding) vessels. They had substantial cargo capacity but were also swift and maneuverable.

Cantle: the raised part of a saddle behind the seat; in this period it was high and strong, made of wood, to help keep a knight in the saddle even after taking a blow from a lance.

Cervelliere: an open-faced helmet that covered the skull like a close-fitting, brimless cap; usually worn over a chain-mail coif.

Chain mail (**mail**): flexible armor composed of interlinking riveted rings of metal. Each link passes through four others.

Chancellors: royal and baronial officials responsible for maintaining, filing, and archiving documents, particularly charters related to the transfer of property and the like. They were usually clerics, and served as advisers to their lords on legal matters.

Chausses: mail leggings to protect a knight's legs in combat.

Coif: a chain-mail hood, either separate from or attached to the hauberk.

Commune: the Italian city-states had assisted the land armies of the crusaders by blockading coastal cities and sometimes providing troops as well. In exchange, they had been granted territory in all the major coastal cities and the right to run their affairs more or less autonomously. The communes were governed by the laws of their founding city (Pisa, Venice, and so on), and had elected officials, headed by a "bailli" who represented them to the other sectors of society, particularly the feudal overlords of the territory in which they had settled.

Conroi: a medieval cavalry formation in which the riders rode stirrup to stirrup in rows that enabled a maximum number of lances to come to bear, but also massed the power of the charge.

Constable: the royal constable was the commanding general of the royal army in the absence of the king. The constable was responsible for mustering the army, ensuring it was adequately supplied, and carrying the king's standard or commanding in the absence of the king. The greater barons often had constables with similar functions, particularly mustering the vassals and securing the supplies of the baron's military entourage.

Court of the Bourgeoisie: the judicial body regulating and trying free, non-noble Frankish citizenry in the Kingdoms of Jerusalem and Cyprus.

Court of the Chain: the judicial body regulating maritime law and trying maritime cases.

Court of the Fonde: a court especially created to deal with commercial cases in market towns.

Crenel: an indentation or loophole in the top of a battlement or wall.

Crenelate: the act of adding defensive battlements to a building.

Faranj: (also sometimes Franj) the Arab term for crusaders and their descendants in Outremer.

Fief: land held on a hereditary basis from a lord in return for military service.

Fetlock: the lowest joint in a horse's leg.

Frank: the contemporary term used to describe Latin Christians (crusaders, pilgrims, and their descendants) in the Middle East, regardless of their country of origin. The Arab term "faranj" derived from this.

Destrier: a horse specially trained for mounted combat; a charger or warhorse.

Dragoman: an official of the crown or a baron responsible for representing his lord in the lord's rural domains. Although usually Franks of the sergeant class, they could be locals or knights. Their functions were very similar to English sheriffs. They were paid by their lord. The positions were not inherently hereditary, but custom favored the eldest son or a close relative of the previous dragoman.

Dromond: a large vessel with two to three lateen sails and two banks of oars. These vessels were built very strongly and were consequently slower, but offered more spacious accommodations.

Garderobe: a toilet, usually built on the exterior wall of a residence or fortification, that emptied into the surrounding ditch or moat.

Hajj: the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five duties of a good Muslim.

Hauberk: a chain-mail shirt, either long- or short-sleeved, that in this period reached to just above the knee.

High Court: similar to but more powerful than the English House of Lords, it was the council in which all the barons of the Kingdom (whether Jerusalem or Cyprus) sat to conduct the business of the state. The High Court was the legislature of the kingdoms, but also the chief executive body and the judiciary for the feudal elite. The High Court elected the kings, conducted foreign policy, and tried their peers.

Iqta: a Seljuk institution similar to a fief in feudal Europe, but not hereditary. It was a gift from an overlord to a subject of land or other sources of revenue, which could be retracted at any time at the whim of the overlord.

Jihad: a Muslim holy war, usually interpreted as a war against nonbelievers to spread the faith of Islam.

Kettle helm: an open-faced helmet with a broad rim, common among infantry.

Khan: a large building built around a courtyard, often with a well, that provided temporary warehousing for goods on the ground floor and housing/lodgings on the upper stories for traveling merchants.

Lance: a cavalry weapon approximately fourteen feet long, made of wood and tipped with a steel head.

Mamlukes (also Mamelukes and Mamluks): former slaves who had been purchased or captured and then subjected to rigorous military training to make them an elite corps of fanatically loyal soldiers. Although technically freed on reaching adulthood, most generally retained a slavish devotion to their former masters and could be trusted to serve with particular selflessness. A Mamluke could, however, also be rewarded with lands and titles (e.g., a iqta) or

simply valuable gifts. In 1250, the Mamlukes would revolt against their Sultan, murder him, and seize power for themselves.

Marshal: a royal or baronial official responsible for the horses of his lord's feudal host, including valuing the horses of vassals and ensuring compensation for losses.

Melee: a form of tournament in which two teams of knights face off across a large natural landscape and fight in conditions very similar to real combat, across ditches, hedges, swamps, streams, and so on. These were very popular in the late twelfth century—and very dangerous, often resulting in injuries and even deaths to both men and horses. The modern meaning of any confused, hand-to-hand fight among a large number of people derives from the medieval meaning.

Merlon: the solid part of a battlement or parapet between two openings or "crenels."

Outremer: A French term meaning "overseas," used to describe the crusader kingdoms (Kingdom of Jerusalem, County of Tripoli, County of Edessa, and Principality of Antioch) established in the Holy Land after the First Crusade.

Pommel: 1) the raised portion in front of the seat of a saddle; 2) the round portion of a sword above the hand grip.

Palfrey: a riding horse.

Parapet: A wall with crenelation built on a rampart or outer defensive work.

Quintain: a pivoted gibbet-like structure with a shield suspended from one arm and a bag of sand from the other, used to train for mounted combat.

Rampart: an earthen embankment surmounted by a parapet, encircling a castle or city as a defense against attack.

Ra'is (also Rays and Rais): in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, a native (Syrian) "head man," "chief," or "elder" recognized by the native community as a man of authority. The position was usually hereditary, and the Ra'is usually occupied a larger house and held more property or more lucrative property (such as olive orchards, mills, or wine presses) than the average peasant in the village.

Rear-Tenants: men who held land fiefs from tenants-in-chief of the crown—i.e., the vassals of vassals. Most tenants-in-chief of the crown held large territories they could not themselves manage and owed scores of knights to the feudal levee. They met their obligations by dividing up their holdings into smaller segments consisting of a few villages, or in some cases feudal privileges such as mills and bakeries, and bestowing these holdings on individual

knights in exchange for rents and feudal service.

Scabbard (also **sheath**): the protective outer case of an edged weapon, particularly a sword or dagger.

Scribes: in the context of Outremer, scribes were (obviously literate) officials responsible for collecting taxes and fees within a certain domain. They were usually natives (Syrian or Greek), but they were appointed by the lord of the domain and required his trust. They were often paid in land or payments in kind. There is no evidence that they were necessarily clerical.

Seneschal: the kings and great nobles employed this household official, who generally had responsibility for the finances of their lord—rather like the CFO of a major corporation today.

Snecka: a warship or galley that was very swift and maneuverable but had only a single bank of oars in addition to the sail, and so a low freeboard. These evolved from Viking raiding ships.

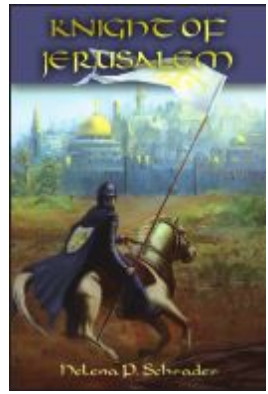
Surcoat: the loose, flowing cloth garment worn over armor; in this period it was slit up the front and back for riding and hung to mid-calf. It could be sleeveless or have short, wide elbow-length sleeves. It could be of cotton, linen, or silk and was often brightly dyed, woven, or embroidered with the wearer's coat of arms.

Tenant-in-chief: an individual holding land directly from the crown.

Turcopoles: troops drawn from the Orthodox Christian population of the crusader states. These were not, as is sometimes suggested, Muslim converts, nor were they necessarily the children of mixed marriages.

Vassal: an individual holding a fief (land) in exchange for military service.

Also by Helena P. Schrader



A leper king,

A landless knight,

And the struggle for Jerusalem.

Book I in the Jerusalem Trilogy. Balian, the younger son of a local baron, goes to Jerusalem to seek his fortune. Instead, he finds himself trapped into serving a young prince suffering from leprosy. The unexpected death of the King makes the leper boy King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem — and Balians prospects begin to improve…

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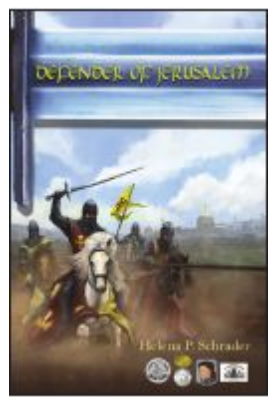

A divided kingdom,

A united enemy

And the struggle for Jerusalem

Book II of the Jerusalem Trilogy. The Christian kingdom of Jerusalem is under siege. The charismatic Kurdish leader Salah ad-Din has united Shiite Egypt and Sunnite Syria and has declared jihad against the Christian kingdom. While King Baldwin IV struggles to defend his kingdom from the external threat despite the increasing ravages of leprosy, the struggle for the succession threatens to tear the kingdom apart from the inside.

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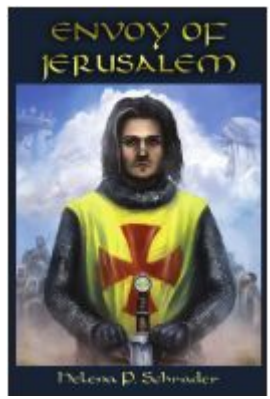

A lost kingdom,

A lionhearted king,

And the struggle for Jerusalem

Book III of the Jerusalem Trilogy. Balian has survived the devastating defeat at Hattin, and walked away a free man after the surrender of Jerusalem, but he is baron of nothing in a kingdom that no longer exists. Haunted by the tens of thousands of Christians enslaved by the Saracens, he is determined to regain what has been lost. The arrival of a crusading army led by Richard the Lionheart offers hope — but also conflict, as natives and crusaders clash and French and English quarrel.

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